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# EPOCH'S END

TARASHANKAR BANERJEE

*Translated from Bengali, 'Manwantar'*

BY

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MITRALAYA

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## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Tarashankar Banerjee is perhaps the foremost figure among Bengali writers of fiction to-day. There are others superior to him in technical excellence, but there is none to equal the breadth of his vision and his big-hearted approach to vital contemporary questions. More than the majority of his fellow-writers, he has been deeply impressed by the events of our tumultuous age. A patriot to his finger-tips, he has never been above the battle ; twice he has tasted the rigours of life in British jails as a participant in the struggle, led by Mahatma Gandhi, for Indian freedom. He is by no means the "ivory tower" artist seeking to stow himself away from the life of society ; he realises very keenly that the bridge between life and letters must go if the arts are to play their rightful role. It is, thus, in the fitness of things that Tarashankar is a leader of the Progressive Writers' movement in India.

*Epoch's End* ("Manvantar"), published in Bengali in January 1944, is not Tarashankar's best work, but is surely one of the most significant things he has written. It is his first novel in a metropolitan setting—a fast-moving story of Calcutta in late '42 and early '43, told in a manner which suggests that the author wanted perhaps to write a play and then changed his mind,—the story of life in a city thrown off its balance by unusual happenings, by air raids and by famine and pestilence. He portrays the disintegration of the old social order, but he does not shut his eyes for a moment to the rainbow in the rain—he sees a brave new order glimmering beyond the horizon and makes his reader see it too.

Tarashankar's admirers in Bengal generally prefer his pictures\* of the Bengal village, and for an example one might single out "*Panchagram*" (*Five Villages*)—which awaits translation—artistically a more satisfying piece of work, full of local colour handled with confidence and success. It is a concrete picture of a definite region in Bengal and as such is an achievement, for even the late Saratchandra Chatterjee, usually considered the greatest Bengali novelist, wrote stories that could

have had for their venue almost anywhere in Bengal. There is nothing slipshod in Tarashankar's observations of the countryside, and his characters have a pleasing objectivity. He does not hide his fascination even for the decaying aristocracy which, like Charles II apologising for his unconscionable delay in dying, has indeed a charm of its own. His gallery of portraits in *Epoch's End*, however, is comparative speaking, rather hastily improvised. There is in it a certain cinematographic quality which orthodox critics might disapprove in a novel. But Tarashankar depicts here a situation so significant in itself that even a fairly photographic record takes on the undeniable habiliments of art.

Tarashankar's Bengali needed a lot of coaxing before it could be made to put on what, it is hoped, is at least a presentable foreign garb. The translation is fairly literal; that explains why a certain repetitiousness, plausible in Bengali but likely to be considered prolixity in English, has been permitted to remain. Foreigners who live in happier lands may also notice that most of the characters have a heaviness of mind; that is the result of massive nervous strain to which Bengal—and India—has been subjected to long-standing alien control of her destinies. *Epoch's End*, however, will amply recompense the foreign reader who is ready and willing to make an effort and understand what happens to people's minds and hearts in countries that are beyond his normal range of knowledge and experience.

## EPOCH'S END

### (I)

Forty-two years of the twentieth century are near completion. What changes have these years seen in Bengal, let alone the rest of the world! But for a full one hundred years the Chakravartis have been resting on their oars, content with the laurels they won so long ago in the struggle for existence; like the wrestler who, after a gruelling bout in the ring, has a satiating bath and with scented cotton-wool pressed into his ear-hole lolls back in somnolent comfort, the Chakravartis put up their shutters and closed their eyes—never to look out again. Their house remained shut to all the winds that blow, and when they would venture out, the air did not seem to touch them. So, even to-day they belong to the Middle Ages. If a wrestler, accustomed to vigorous physical exercise, gives it all up and drinks gallons of syrupy *sherbet*, he gets dyspepsia or a bulging paunch—both maladies dreadful to whoever cares for physical well-being. For the rich, similarly, the idle indulgence in accumulated prosperity, the easy renunciation of all money-making effort even, is no less of a malady. It does not mean only that all the water oozes out of the cistern; it means also fissures on the reservoir where insects and centipedes with varying quantities of venom in their eely bodies make their home, and the empty cistern breeds microbes of different sorts.

In those early days, Sukhamay Chakravarti was a veritable titan for work. He founded, as it were, a kingdom of his own over no less than fifty *bighas* of land in

Calcutta, where he built *bustees* and lorded it over the tenants ; in Rambagan and Sonagachhi area, he had put up some fifteen houses which would be let out ; for himself and his family he had built, over ten *cottahs* of land, a palatial residence with two separate and sumptuous apartments. And one fine morning, with the comforting assurance of several hundred thousand rupees in the bank, he leaned back like a feudal chieftain on luxurious cushions in his newly-built drawing room, smoked a leisurely hubble-bubble, and said goodbye to all work.

He could not shed all his former proclivities, however ; like the retired wrestler, he would at least give himself a few occasional physical jerks. He would drive his coach-and-four, attend meetings and parties, send subscriptions to philanthropic institutions, sail in pleasure-boats on the Ganges. But when it came to be the turn of his sons, they even gave all that up and merely indulged in drinks of nutmeg *sherbet*. Thus, in the second generation the Chakravartis got fairly stuck in sheer inertia. The only time all three brothers showed their vigour was when they beat their wives, play high stakes at cards, go to the races and have drunken orgies. In the outer apartments, where the ladies of the house were denied entry, dancing girls would be regularly and frequently requisitioned ; the masters of the house would sell a race-horse to-day and buy another to-morrow. It wasn't so very different in the inner apartments either, where the ladies reigned. They would call the jeweller ever so often and give orders and counter-orders for varieties of ornaments, buy masses of *saris* and blouses and visit relations to display the latest sartorial acquisitions, go to theatres on week-end nights, and spend the other nights in listless vigil for husbands usually away in dubious places. From time to time, of course, there

would come some little novelty in their routine. That was when infants would emerge from their mother's womb for a few precarious days and then die off, for in the Chakravarti family, most of the children have died and still die before being taken out of the lying-in chamber. And then the womenfolk would cry for a few days. In their grief they would sense a certain secret relief. The infants who would manage to survive would grow rickety, with a hideous shrivel in their skin, breathing with laboured movements like a confirmed asthmatic. The first symptoms of foul disease would be manifest early enough.

The Chakravartis to-day have the disease all plain enough in every limb. They haven't now the strength to digest nutmeg *sherbet*, and the nutmeg too has vanished. Little is left of the bank deposits, the Sonagachi houses have changed hands, on the fifty *bighas* of *bustee* land many a stranger has put up a house of his own, and in the mansion which old Sukhamoy had built for his family, at least twenty-five banyan trees have sent their roots deep down into the fissures in the old structure which waited long years in vain for repairs. It was as if in every skeleton of the old house the ubiquitous banyan had extended its claws. When deep at night a strong breeze blew, one could hear its leaves as if some unseen spirit was whistling an uncanny tune.

In the second generation, the Chakravartis were three brothers—sons of Sukhamoy. Of the three, the second alone is alive. He is sixty-five and looks as if he must once have been an attractive person. Now one sees him with the face paralysed on one side, with his teeth all out, the body stricken like a tottering building, but still alive. In the old days, he was an enthusiast of the theatre and

even now he talks with an actor's mannerism ; on his arm a load of amulets, a confusion of stone and metal contraptions. At all hours of the day his voice could be heard, invoking his god to tell him what sins he had committed to have fallen so low, he would curse the universe and wail that all was evil. And he would tell himself to console his woes that one day his god would come, come down to the earth and overturn everything, for hadn't He said in the Scriptures that from age to age He incarnates Himself? The old man had turned quite religious these days ; every day he would carefully wrap a silk prayer-rug round his shoulder and sit down to his devotions ; he would read out passages from the *Gita* and the *Chandi* himself, and once a week would hear the priest recite some expiatory incantations. At midnight, this devotee, pestered by bed-bugs or exasperated by the heat, would vent his wrath by beating his sixty-year-old wife with the handle of his palm-leaf fan, or if he felt that way, would put her out of the room to sleep in the open. To the sixty-year-old wife, this was neither wrong of him nor humiliating for her ; with silly serenity she would hobble along on her gouty legs and find a possible corner in the large house to sleep in. And she would get up at dawn, and recite prayers to the deity, mispronouncing every word, understanding not a syllable of the incantation except to ache vaguely for God to dispense His blessings and cure all evil. Then her day's routine would start with preparations for her husband's comfort. She would get ready his hot water, tooth-paste and tongue-scraper, his medicine phial and opium container ; she would make his tea and rub mustard oil on his body before the bath. She could only rest when her husband had had his meal and gone out on his errands. The old man once bought cars for himself, but now he looks out

for other buyers and tries to get some commission on sales. Another member of that generation still surviving was the widow of Sukhamoy's youngest son—corpulent and completely deaf, crazy for cleanliness and morbidly scenting pollution everywhere, centred solely in herself.

The three brothers in the second generation had eleven children altogether—seven sons and four daughters. It is of this third generation that we now speak. The daughters are married and live with their husbands. The sons' wives and children now comprise the family. Even more than the past is the present listless and inert. The family's old age, complete in the third generation, has gradually turned in the fourth into utter debility. Of the seven brothers and four sisters in the third generation, five are lunatics. The rest lead serpentine lives, like the harassed debtor meandering his way through the backdoor and tortuous alleys to avoid the creditor waiting to prey upon him. You will not hear their voices during the day; but often in the night they make up for it by horrid mutual bickerings. And yet these half-wits spare no pains to shield their children from all contact with the world outside, for they hug the illusion that one day they would grow into geniuses! As a result, one sees a pampered eighteen-year-old young man behaving only as an infant does and an eleven-year-old girl rushes out of the house whenever she has a chance, accosts stray pedestrians and begs for a few *pice* and returns home at ten in the night. Happy with her nitwitted adventure she breaks loudly into fatuous song, the signal to the neighbours that it was ten o'clock.

How in that atmosphere the eldest grandson of the family could grow into healthy normality is a mystery. He reads for the M.Sc. examination, goes regularly to the University to attend his classes, acts as coach to a junior



student to earn a little money and, unlike the family, moves about unafraid and fairly uninhibited. It is only when he returns home that he gets a queer, confusing feeling. He fears as if the family contagion constantly spurs at him and the attack won't be long in coming. And so he spends as much time as he can outside. Deep at night, his sleep would often be broken by *Mejababu's* wails, he would feel the anguish in the unresting footsteps of the sleepless family lunatics, and hardly resist crying into his pillow. Was there to be deliverance for him from the virus? Wasnt the contagion also in his blood? He could not forget what a doctor, his father's friend, had once told him. And often he wondered why he turned out to be such an exception in the family. Would it not have been better, he would ponder with unhealthy insistence, if he had grown up like the rest of them—half-witted and insensitive to fear or remorse? And perhaps the next moment he would recall how in men the good transcends the evil and how, as it were, the good in him must transcend the evil accumulated in the family's bones, and in an instant he would feel a kind of ineffable compassion for his family. And for all the visible and invisible ravages of the taint, they were a beautiful family; such beauty of form was rare, if rather pathetic. He felt that they were all in his charge—a sense of trust and responsibility which he felt all the more when he was in his mother's presence. How lovely his mother was! She looked like a sculptured image, golden-hued, radiating loveliness, with two poor bangles as her only ornament. Kanai, her son, was proud of her and no wonder. He knew his mother came of a poor family, where she was brought up free of the corrosive atmosphere of her husband-to-be's family. That was, indeed, the saving of her, though

the other women in the family would often rail at her lowly origin and explain her neat, economical habits by reference to her penurious past. Kanai would laugh to hear such things said of his mother. Aren't those who go hungry entitled even to be greedy? And isn't a sort of hesitancy and unseemly eagerness their only fault? Such were the thoughts he would turn over in his mind, and sure as anything, he scorned those who mocked the poor who went hungry and so naturally hankered after inaccessible food, he scorned the insolence of those who even in their satiety would gorge themselves and parade their prosperity by throwing away victuals that the poor could never hope for, he scorned the gormandizing which turned muscles into lumps of ugly fat. He wasn't ashamed that his mother came of an impecunious family, he thought no end of his mother because, at any rate, she brought no inherited taint in her blood to inject it into his system, and he hated his mother's father. What a shocking old blighter he was to have given away his daughter to a tainted family! How he had thrown the golden image into the saline depths of the sea where, as fable has it, is stored a wealth of precious things!

There was another in the family for whom Kanai had some respect and felt a kind of compassion. This was his great-grandmother, mother of *Mejababu*, wife of the maker of the family fortune, the famous Sukhamoy Chakravarti. Ninety years of age—blind, and completely deaf—she lived on as a discarded lump of shrunken flesh. Her son had named her *Nikasha*, mother of the fabled *Ravana*, who lived to see her entire family obliterated. Every morning *Mejababu* saw the old mother still very much alive—he saw around himself the dance of the shadows of death and felt for certain that his mother only waited for another

bereavement—his own death! Old Sukhamoy, besides, had left her some little property which he would have inherited if only she died before he did. *Mejababu's* patience was indeed very sorely tried.

Everybody else in the house seemed to wish for *Mejababu's* death—even his only son, Mani, Kanai's uncle, was no exception. For his death would mean the transfer of whatever little property was left to Mani's hands. But if, on the contrary, *Mejababu* got his mother's longevity . . . Mani gets irritated at the thought of it and vents his spleen on the children. He would feel like striking his head against a stone in exasperation, but he knew it was a painful process and instead shouted at his noisy children and hit their head against the wall.

*Mejababu* would approve of the disciplinary proceedings and shout from his room: "That's right. Give it hot to them, the young blighters! We're like the million-strong *Yadus* of old . . . a pack of devils . . . H'm, that's the way to break them! . . ."

Early in the morning one day, Kanai stood on the open terrace of the outer apartments. Once on a time the terrace was the venue of gala parties. On festive occasions, the terrace would be covered over with reed-thatch, guests would sit down to a sumptuous meal, and watch the varied entertainment which the Chakravartis were wont to provide. Now the terrace shows cracks here and there, the cement has in places worn off and little cavities have formed, the plaster on the railing is as good as gone. To the south of the terrace was the three-storied inner apartments, the wooden panels on the verandah fairly broken, several doors and windows precariously hingeless. In the western corner of the inner apartments could be

seen three suites of bathrooms on the three floors, a huge and dilapidated cistern on the roof and the pipes, left unpainted for years, and badly in need of long-deferred repairs. And just beside the cistern a banyan plant sprouted defiantly to a height of some three feet, its roots dug into a crack on the roof, with ten or twelve fibrous emanations lengthening fast towards the ground, waving in the morning breeze like tufts of coily flowers.

Kanai and his mother were then the only two people up and about in the house. All else were still asleep; only the two tramway conductors and several newsboys who had rented a portion of the ground floor in the outer apartments had already left for their jobs. His mother herself did the maid's work in her portion of the inner apartments, but the other co-parceners could not do without domestic servants. The maids come and go; for every time they ask for their wages they are given such a talking-to that they quit, and others, from among the army of unemployed, take their place to move out again before long. The maids had got up and were crowding near the water-tap. Spreading out their water-jugs and vessels of various shapes, they were settling down to enjoy the coming day with a rehearsal of vociferous squabbles in the morning. On the cornice of the first and second floors were a flock of pigeons, now settled in a row, then flapping their wings about and settling down again for a while. Years ago, their ancestors were the pets of the aristocrats in the family, and in exchange of good money had brought their blue blood for the delectation of their rich fanciers, but the days of glory had vanished, and the pigeons had bred indiscriminately and were now a motley collection. They had little contact now with their masters and had to get their own food from wherever they could. The older and more daring among

the pigeons would still suddenly perch on little children's shoulders and tear away the food in their hands, and would descend in a flock on foodgrains set out in the sun to dry. Of an evening, the young gluttons of the Chakravarti family would put a stool on top of a chair, reach up to their nests, collect one or two pigeons, and have a jolly feed. *Mejababu* alone would sometimes throw the poor creatures a few grains of oat, and sternly rebuke the pigeons, as if they were men, whenever he found them having a good old scramble for foodgrains. Not unoften he would notice the feathers of a pigeon only too obviously killed to provide somebody's dinner and would ask indignantly what had happened. Invariably he was told it was the cat's doing, and then he would shout curses on the cat, collect with quiet deliberation a few feathers with which to tickle his ears and put them carefully in a broken drawer.

To the west of the house was a *bustee*. Lower middle-class people who have in reality become proletarians and are yet rather ashamed to admit it, lived in those rows of tin-and-tile huts. All the deprivations and discomforts of *bustee* life were theirs, but they made frantic efforts to keep up some at least of the appearances of gentility. The usual *bustee* squabbles would irritate them; whenever they were in a position to do so they would hang faded curtains on doors and windows, and screen off portions of the narrow verandah of the better-class mud-huts with hessian or old and dilapidated panels. In one or two of these habitations the curtains were not so faded and their colour would shine defiantly by contrast; life there was a little less bare, you could see long string hangers on which gaudy *saris*, blouses, frocks, chemises and shirts would be set out to dry in the sun. Strangely enough, it was from the better type of dwellings that most of the noise in the *bustee* would

emanate. The inhabitants there had been very much lower down in the scale of earnings, but though workers still, they had begun moving towards lower middle-class respectability. The stink of cheap cigarettes would spread from those dwellings to the rest of the *bustee*, the pungent smell of *hilsa* frying and meat stewing in earthen pots would pervade the atmosphere often enough; quite as frequently would be heard the drunken voice of the menfolk at ten or eleven at night. These men would go out early every morning; dressed in shorts and a *Khaki* shirt they would file out towards the workshops, each with a little tiffin-box in his hand. Some would ride on bicycles, while most of them walked.

Life had begun to stir in those little houses already, songs and tunes that had made a hit in the pictures could be heard, sometimes in a sort of bawdy chorus. In one of them, an old gramophone had already been put on; the damaged sound-box gave an impression of the singer having a very sore throat. All day long this miserable contraption would be bawling out; you certainly couldn't stop it till the radio in a newly built house nearby was giving out its day's dreary programme. It was funny the way puny prosperity would indulge in mutual rivalry!

The other dwellings were just too cruelly oppressed by want and worry. The men and women would keep the melancholy of body and mind covered over with a cloak of grave gentility. They had got up earlier and had begun to move with quiet, tired steps behind the barrier of whatever poor curtains and panels they could improvise. The strained silence, ghastly enough, would be broken perhaps by some rickety child, unaware of the responsibilities of respectability, crying its heart out with a sort of weird insistence. The cooking utensils were being given

their daily cleansing, but even the sound of the metal seemed hushed. In one of these respectable houses, a man in a *lungi*, bare from the waist, was smoking a *biri*. In the open space between the houses, women were busy working. Most of them must have been comely enough once, but they were now pale and haggard. From one of these houses a girl was coming quietly towards the street; she was about fifteen and with the shyness that girls of her age were taught, kept her gaze fixed as it were on the ground. She carried on her arm a wooden receptacle for flowers and was going to the near-by house with a garden attached, to collect flowers for the day's worship at home. She was dark and short, her *sari* and blouse must have seen better days. But though dark, she had a pleasant look, and you couldn't fail to notice her thick black hair which trailed down in a lovely mass. Her people had been living there a long time, and Kanai knew her well. She would come often to his house to play with her friend Uma, Kanai's sister. A very good girl she was, was Geeta. When she came within earshot, Kanai called out to her affectionately: "Going to pluck flowers, Geeta?" She just looked up shyly and smiled.

The faint roar of an airplane could be heard from somewhere up in the heavens. World War II of the twentieth century was in progress. It was impossible to tell from the sound where the plane was. Often enough, the plane flew where you did not expect it from the apparent direction of the noise. Kanai looked up at the sky, but he could not spot the mammoth bird of the air. When he looked down he found Geeta's gaze still fixed on him. She felt somewhat embarrassed and said awkwardly—"I couldn't spot the plane either"—and walked away.

Kanai's mother came up to the door of the inner apartments and called, "Kanoo, your tea is ready".

Kanai turned round and said, "Yes, mother, I'm coming".

The day's routine demanded that Kanai should gulp down his tea and hurry to the residence of the student whom he coached. His mother said in a hardly audible tone of voice, "Can't you get them to give your month's salary to-day?"

He looked at his mother, and she put her head down and whispered, "The larder is quite empty, son."

## (II)

Long queues were forming already in front of the 'Control' shops for sugar and kerosene. Both these commodities had got very scarce in the market; import of sugar from Java and the islands adjoining it had ceased: Burma had passed into Japanese hands, and kerosene sources in Burma were no longer accessible. Wheat and wheat products were getting rarer and rarer, the price was leaping from day to day. Cloth prices soared like blazes. Even before the *Pujas*, *dhotis* sold at six rupees and *saris* at seven; since then prices had altered, and Kanai did not know for certain, but round about November and December, it could not have been less than eight or nine rupees. It wasn't possible for Kanai to treat himself to new clothes at *Puja* time, but he had to buy something for his mother, and in deference to her unspoken wishes, for his ailing brothers and sisters also. This had exhausted the two months' tuition salary which he had set apart. His father had asked for two vests—"don't buy cheap stuff for me, if you're buying any at all," the father had said, for he still



could not bring himself to like things of average quality. Kanai would regret all this expense, he really couldn't afford it. But when he thought of his little brothers and sisters happy in their colourful finery, he felt it was worth while. In spite of the hereditary taint, theirs was a good-looking family; the children seemed to bring with them the beauty of angels cursed out of heaven. Kanai could hardly resist his tears when he looked at his lovely sisters, he would think, then, of the family virus that had made its home in their blood, like snakes in tumble-down cottages, and would one day hiss poison into the cells and debilitate the comely frame. How their beauty was meant to build a paradise here below, but instead it harboured tainted blood and threatened to disseminate its perversions!

Next door was a large house with a big compound but it was old and dilapidated. In a few generations it had been partitioned among many sharers, and in the portions allotted to some, Marwaris had come in as tenants. Whoever of the family remained seemed to be in the same boat as the Chakravartis. Perhaps there was a similar taint in their blood too. In how many of the world's large mansions is this one drama being enacted!

Facing the compound, alongside the road, the A.F.S. had set up an establishment. In their blue uniform, they would practise with their long hoses. A little further, the road met one of Calcutta's principal thoroughfares, where long rows of military lorries were unceasingly on the move. Military police in Khaki, red caps on their head and the letters M.P. inscribed on a black badge on the arm, were regulating traffic. Lorries, yellow and green, and of various sizes, carrying things of all sorts, from firewood to machine guns and even a few light tanks. In the rush of traffic could be seen occasionally a large and really

beautiful R.A.F. bus glide on the asphalt. Perhaps alongside of it, as if acting as its herald, would rush at breakneck speed a motor-bike, the rider a picturesque figure in an iron helmet and gutta-percha goggles. Up above could be seen a flock of noisy airplanes flying in V formations. Picking their way precariously through the rows of military lorries, two suburban buses managed to emerge; they were crowded to more than their capacity, and passengers perched even on the bumpers.

Suddenly a shout rang out in tones of command: 'Hey! stop!' And simultaneously the crowd on the street bawled out a disharmony of 'Ah!-s.'

In a trice, Kanai turned round and saw that the military lorries were pulling up their brakes, and on the other side at a corner of the crossroads, stood a gaunt, ugly figure in a loin-cloth, leaning slightly backwards and looking as if he had with main force stopped the menacing movement of the machines. He was mad Jaga, known to all in the locality, stark, raving mad, who wandered from street to street, and lived on scraps of food picked out of dust-bins. What turned this lunatic into a hero, thought Kanai, but the next moment Jaga was running ahead of the vehicles to where the front car was, and picked up the bloodstained body of an injured child who was run over. The crowd followed Jaga to the pavement and started an uproar. The sharp whistle of the military police rang out and to the signal for movement, the march of machines was resumed. About the same time Kanai heard a clock in a shop strike behind him; he looked round and saw it was half past seven. It was winter—December—and besides, it was the new Indian Standard Time. Kanai hurried on towards the tram depot. Two lorries went past him, stacked with vegetables. They were

ordinary lorries, but the drivers wore *Khaki* uniform and iron helmet.

Kanai could still hear, as it were, mad Jaga's strident order to the lorries to stop. He could see in his mind's eye the slightly inclined, muscular body of the lunatic in a passing pose of great authority. He kept on recalling it even after he boarded the tram. There was an armed sentry guarding the entrance to the tram depot.

On both sides of the street, the walls were plastered with a medley of advertisements of various kinds and colours. . . Dance and song programmes at the theatre . . . "The Flowers of Love" on the . . . stage . . . "Anonymous Letters" . . . "The Bangles of Wedlock" . . . "The amazing glory of the virtuous Hindu wife even in these degenerate days" . . . "Nagen Ray, emperor of histrionics, in the unforgettable role of a lunatic!" . . . In the lobbies of four adjoining Cinema houses were hung notices—"Fourth Class Full", "Third Class Full"; one announced "House Full". It was Saturday. After two, Kanai went on imagining, the pavements would be crowded, in trams and buses women in colourful *saris*. Strange! Kanai smiled at the thought that his *bustee* neighbours would then, as it were, spread in all their vulgarity and cheap ostentation all over the city. Just behind him in the tram sat two elderly men discussing transmigration of the soul and the sins of this life being visited in the next—"All this degeneration to-day is the result of our accumulated sins of many births", he heard, "In *Kaliyuga*, religion recedes and to-day seems near vanishing point".

The other man, approving, added: "Haven't you read *Chetavani*? He says that the deluge perhaps is coming—this *Sravan* . . . it shan't be long . . ."

"There's no 'perhaps' about it", snapped the former; "it's just going to happen. The recent cyclone has been the mere prelude. I'm telling you—what has happened in Midnapore will be repeated everywhere—Yes, it will, you can take my word for it . . . and not merely famine, but earthquake with it, too . . . that'll be the end of the world, and a good job it will be!"

In a front bench, two young men were talking politics. "Hasn't Syamaprasad written a really spirited letter to the Bengal Governor? . . . It's not for nothing that Fazlul Huq thinks no end of Syamaprasad—he's got his father's guts alright!"

Kanai's thoughts wandered to Midnapore; home of heroes, ecstatic with the spirit of revolt, Midnapore was being crushed by ruthless repression when, of a sudden, there came a murderous gale and the sea-water gushed cruelly into the district and turned it a desert. Hundreds of thousands of men and animals had been washed out of life, hundreds of thousands of corpses had made Midnapore an enormous cemetery . . . Kanai looked out of the tram window and saw on the walls more advertisements—musical soirées and dance-programmes in aid of Midnapore relief, "Send all you can to the Mayor's Relief Fund". Wasn't it announced in the papers yesterday that China's generalissimo, Chiang Kai-Shek, had sent to the fund a contribution of fifty thousand rupees? Kanai turned all this over in his mind and decided to send five rupees out of his salary either to the Mayor's relief fund or to the fund opened by the daily 'Anandabazar'.

The Tram car drew up with a sudden jerk, and a dare-devil rickshaw-walla with presumptuous insouciance pulled his contraption a hair's breadth away to safety. The driver shouted a curse, but the rickshaw-man grimaced and

jogged along. At one stage in the journey Kanai's eyes fell on a street corner where gruesome things had happened during those fateful August days, and he shuddered . . . . It was between Sibnarain Das Lane and Simla Street, and right in front of the Arya Samaj temple . . . . What scenes were enacted there in those excruciating days when the powers that be drowned in relentless repression a people's urge for freedom . . . . Wasn't Kanai himself an eye witness to shootings of unarmed demonstrators? . . . . He shuddered again, and involuntarily he recalled—of all things—Milton's majestic words: "Give me the liberty to know, to utter and argue freely, according to my conscience."

Things weren't quite normal yet, and at the cross-roads where College Street and Harrison Road met were a number of police lorries. Two sergeants on a motor-bike with side-car attached, rushed north on patrol.

Kanai's reverie was suddenly interrupted. "Please vacate the ladies' seat", the conductor shouted, and added with irritation, "Here's a lady waiting. Why don't you listen?" Kanai started—in his pre-occupation he hadn't noticed it was a ladies' seat. He got up, and who should he see but a girl he knew—Neela Sen, till last year a fellow-student and an enthusiastic worker in the student movement. He knew also her brother Nepi who was perhaps the most enthusiastic of all among student workers.

'Oh, it's you', said Neela as she took the seat he had vacated. Neela was dark and rather tall; she wasn't pretty, but had a quiet comeliness. Her acquaintance with Kanai had been rather slight, they had only exchanged a few polite greetings from time to time, but every time they met they felt good and when she smiled back her answers, their mutual shyness would ache, as it were, to crumble . . . .

'Why do you get up? You can take this seat?' She

said, but Kanai thanked her and sat a little apart. It wasn't so easy to get over ages of inhibition, and a whole tram-load of passengers were there to gape at the two! . .

In a mill-made *sari*, and a chocolate woollen coat, Neela looked attractive enough. Her thick black hair was arranged in a braid, but a few defiant wisps flitted prettily on her neck; a slight suggestion of powder gave her brown complexion a seemly brightness.

'I haven't seen you in the office of our society for some time now,' said Kanai; 'I thought you had gone to Allahabad for the Conference'.

'No, I couldn't go,' said Neela, and her face darkened. There was some talk of her going to Allahabad, and she wanted to. Perhaps she couldn't because she didn't have the fare, for Allahabad was quite a distance away, or perhaps she had not been elected one of the delegates.

Kanai changed the topic, and asked, "How's Nepi these days?"

'Oh,' smiled Neela, 'the tempo of his life is on the up-grade, as usual. Some days he wouldn't even come back home—he's so busy with work in the movement. But look, why didn't you go to Allahabad? You should have gone, you know?'

Kanai laughed and said, 'Ah! but you know how hopes are deferred'—he left the sentence incomplete.

'But you told them there was illness in your family?'

'That wasn't quite prevarication, Miss Sen. You see the population of our house is round about thirty, if you count the little ones too, and one or the other of them will, as a rule, be laid up every day with a cold or something! So that was that. But that wasn't the reason of my not going. I wanted to, and couldn't. Isn't that the malady of our modern society?'

Neela did not answer. She knew that Kanai was saying what was true enough. Kanai was known among students as an effective speaker, words came naturally to him and pungent, unanswerable arguments were his *forte*. When attacked by an opponent, his debating talents would be at their sharpest and few could resist his offensive.

'But what makes you tram so early—', he stopped midway, remembering that he did not know her well enough to ask her such a question. But he had said it already, and Neela smiled a little and replied, 'Perhaps you didn't know, but I've got a job now in the War Supply Department'.

'Oh, in that case, you've given up your studies?'

'Yes—and after all, would it have been much good keeping on with them?'

Kanai could not give an answer. Truly enough, where would her further studies lead? As a student she was mediocre. With industry, she might have managed to get a second in her M.A. But after that, what? At the outside, perhaps, a spinster's job as head mistress of a girls' school! Her salary would perhaps be forty or fifty rupees, while she would have to sign for seventy-five or a hundred! Neela was a pleasant girl, no doubt about that; but she hadn't the beauty whose flames would attract young incumbents in the Upper Civil Services. Why, then, defer the pathos of studies which lead nowhere?

'You should see the files accumulated in the office', put in Neela, 'our room looks like the study of some Head Examiner in a Matriculation subject. Now I go to do some over-time work. We're "your most obedient and faithful servants", don't you understand?' She smiled; and Kanai smiled too.

Neela spoke again: 'But where are you going, anyhow?'

'Oh, I'm going to birch my victim. You see, I coach a young fellow—at Bowbazar.'

'Bowbazar?' asked Neela. 'Yes', rejoined Kanai, 'a little distance off the corner there . . . What! this is Wellington Square! Isn't this tram going to Dalhousie Square?'

A passenger, eavesdropping so long, put in a salacious comment. Kanai looked back, but could not discover the culprit; he could see, however, that everybody in the tram seemed to enjoy the situation. Neela turned ashen in a moment, but quicker than Kanai, she regained composure. As the car turned round at Wellington Square, Kanai got up and mumbled in confusion and almost to himself, 'I'm late already—blast it!'

'If you're late already, you might just as well waste a little more time. Why not reach me to my office?' said Neela.

Kanai felt rather comforted at this request—even happy. What was he worth, he felt now, if he couldn't spare a morning for Neela? He sat down again, this time nearer her than before.

Behind them, they felt, was being enacted a lurid scene. It was as if a well-ripened fruit had dropped from the tree and hordes of flies were humming greedily towards it . . .

At Esplanade, they got off, and Neela said, 'Let's go and have some coffee, and then I'll go to my office.'

Kanai blanched, for he remembered what he had in his pocket. But Neela laughed, 'I've got a job now, but it



seems that all I can give my friends is a little coffee and some sandwiches!'

They went into the Coffee-house. It was Kanai's first visit, and he saw men and women of various races—the twentieth century dream of internationalism floating, as it were, in coloured bubbles!

### (III)

After his tuition work Kanai would return home and then rush to College. Then home again, or to the office of the Students' Union. After that, he would be back again to the stifling atmosphere of the Chakravarti household. This was the routine of his life. At home, his nerves on edge, he would curse the family, his own people. Out in the street, he would see the big, prosperous houses on either side and at the same time the pathetic concourse of hungry men and women on the road; he got a shrinking feeling, he was sorry he cursed his family. Wasn't man rather helpless? How could his progenitors alone be blamed for the dirty shape of present things? A kind of excruciating restlessness seemed to have been his portion, and he knew the reason—it was rooted in his veins where the blood flowed!

Somehow today he felt quieter. He had got his salary in the morning, did some shopping on it and kept four rupees for himself. His mother did not like it. She had been taught to nurse a strong instinct for self-torture. She would enjoy giving up everything of her own and losing herself in tireless work for the family's well-being. That was the kind of idealism she cherished and she wanted her son to feel the same way. Kanai did not wish to give her pain if he could help it. So while he repudiated her brand

of idealism, he did not go against her wishes either. His mother had said, 'what makes you want four rupees to spend? You know how much it is worth to our family?'

Perhaps another day Kanai would have given her the four rupees and be done with it. But to-day he told her what was a half-truth. 'I have to pay it in at College', he said.

It was only two rupees he had to pay at College, but he kept the other two, for he wanted to return Neela's hospitality, he wanted one day to have some coffee with her at a restaurant. He surely ought to do it, he was thinking in the evening, when suddenly he heard a row and came out of his room. No, it was no trouble in the family this time, but there was a lot of noise near the *bustee*. Somebody was shouting in Hindi, but with a foreign accent, and was now and again bursting into bad Bengali. It was a row between a *bustee* denizen and a foreigner. In the latter's tone of voice was a lot of hauteur, for he was demanding payment—'Give me my money, quick, you ne'er-do-well!'

Somebody was protesting, ineffectively, in a thin, shrill voice. Kanai could not get the words, except one or two here and there. But he knew from the voice that it was Geeta's father's that is, father of the girl he had met early in the morning, the girl who was a friend of his sister Uma. She would come to their house pretty often at one time, and she even went to school with Uma for some time. But her family was getting poorer, and along with it the shy, young girl got a shrunken look and hardly stirred out of the house. When she walked, it was as if she had a load on her shoulders—it was the terrible load of poverty which Kanai knew so well. The life was being ground out of her, as it were, not so much by starvation as

by the dead-weight of perpetual want. She was getting listless, for life was shrinking within herself, a life quarantined by the barriers of poverty.

Yes, it was Geeta's father whose voice he had heard, and when Kanai went out he saw his hand being gripped by a Kabuliwala. This person was youngish and Kanai used to see him almost twice every day, for he would be waiting outside one or other house of this locality. His profession was to lend out money at exorbitant interest. He had come all the way from distant Afghanistan or Peshawar to set up in usury. Among his debtors were dissipated sons of the rich who waited impatiently for their father's death. But most of them were poor middle-class people who were daily going down the slippery slope of proletarianisation. When Kanai came up, Geeta's father was shouting shrilly, 'Would you get your money if you hit me? I haven't just got it to give you'.

'Give me the interest, then—the interest. You haven't given me a pie these last two months. You swindler!'

Kanai went forward and said, 'I say, you let go of him this time. You can't assault him like that.'

The man laughed and rejoined, 'Look here, Babuji, as long as I have strength in me, I can use it alright'.

Kanai felt like hitting the fellow, but he checked himself. With an effort he smiled and said, 'Yes, you are right. Might is what matters in the world, but it isn't your monopoly . . . Now, let go of this gentleman's hand.'

The Kabuli looked astonished. He was a good foot taller than Kanai and in bulk at least double. And yet he had told him—'Might isn't your monopoly, you know!'

Geeta's father, scenting sympathy, started crying demonstratively: 'You see for yourself, young Sir, what a

tyrant this man is! It's war-time and I'm out of a job for two months, while this man uses force thus!'

Kanai took no notice of him but told the Kabuli, 'Now, you let go of him!

The Kabuli complained. It was not that he was afraid of Kanai, but he somehow seemed to admire Kanai's courage, and after all, it was Kanai's country and not his. He added: 'All right, but you are a gentleman and you arbitrate and get me back my money. If he can't pay the principal, let him pay the interest. It's six rupees and four annas—two months' interest on fifty rupees.'

Six rupees and four annas as two months' interest on fifty rupees! It was astounding. Kanai was dumbfounded. Where this matter would have led, one did not know, but quite unexpectedly it got settled. From the other side of the *bustee* came an elderly woman and said, 'Hey, Kabuli, here's your two months' interest! Now, you go, quick!' And she threw the money into the man's palm.

This gave Kanai no less of a surprise. He knew that woman also lived a little distance from the bustee and was known as *Bamoon Didi* (Brahmin sister). Her ways were so masculine that many called her *Bamoon Dada* (brother) behind her back. She used to move about in trams and buses, sporting slippers and a man's umbrella. She would earn her livelihood by helping to arrange marriages and getting her commission on each transaction. Occasionally she would lend money at high interest against security. Kanai could not just imagine that she paid the six rupees, four annas out of sheer goodness of heart. What was her game, he wondered, for if Geeta's parents had borrowed it of her, then the money should have been paid in by one of them and not by her.

The woman said aloud, as if to herself, 'What a pity! He's a neighbour, a gentleman. How can we just look on when he's being insulted? What if my money goes to the devil!' And so parading her benevolence, she went towards the house where Geeta and her people lived.

Kanai began turning over in his mind what the woman had said. He was ready to think well of people and got some consolation from the fact that she did have, after all, some goodness of heart. And when he went back home, he worried over his not having paid the money himself—he should have done it, he felt, and he decided that next morning he would ask for Geeta—no, not Geeta perhaps, that may not look nice, but he would call her brother Hiren—and give him the four rupees he had. For a while he went up to the terrace of the outer apartments and stood looking at the house where Geeta's people lived. He could see clear enough that Geeta's father was in bed and breathing in his laboured, asthmatic way. He felt sorry for the poor man suffering so, especially in the cold weather, when the affliction aggravated.

When Geeta's father Pradyot Bhattacharyya had first got his attack of asthma, he was quite a well-to-do person, even a dandy. Now the shawls and coats he used to sport in the old days were gone; some had been pawned and never released, the best shawl had been sold, and only torn remnants of the cheaper ones remained for him to cover up his throat against chills.

Pradyot's asthma and cough originated, not in a cold, but in indigestion. At one time he was much too fond of rich, spicy food. But indigestion, though the primary cause of his ailment, had now become secondary, for he did not get these days any rich food; lack of money and food,

indeed, was now his chief worry. So his body had shrunk, he'd frantically smoke *biris* on an empty stomach, cough and have asthmatic fits. When these fits came, his eyes would bulge out, and even in winter he would perspire heavily in the effort to breathe. It wasn't only when he smoked that he got these fits. Excitement would cause them, and then he would cough piteously and look as if he would soon be petering out.

Pradyot Bhattacharyya belonged to a well-known family of Brahmin *Pandits* in a Calcutta suburb. His ancestors had some rent-free land, a sturdy little one-storeyed house, and a wide reputation for scripture knowledge. His great-grand-father was an old-type orthodox *Pandit*, who had refused to accept service under the unclean *Mlechchas* when the East India Company had offered him a job as Professor of Sanskrit at Fort William College. It was not merely the foreigner's offer that he scorned; he would never accept gifts from *Sudras*. Even to-day his family remembered those days of unbending orthodoxy, and when the old man's grandson, Pradyot's father, introduced forbidden onions to the family table, the innocent vegetable was given a suitable scriptural designation to cover up the supposed taint in its composition!

Pradyot's grandfather practised the profession of *Guru* (Spiritual preceptor). In those days the Kayasthas and Vaishyas of Calcutta had amassed fortunes in the Company's service. They would gorge themselves with lavish European dinners and would need spiritual pills to feel purged and secure from the anger of the gods on account of the transgression of orthodox rules! The *Guru's* profession was thus quite lucrative, but Pradyot's grandfather could not help feeling that after all his so-called disciples who bowed down their heads to him were really ahead of him in the

social scale. So caring little for the easy emoluments of the sacred profession, he sent Pradyot's father—his son—to an English school. Released, comparatively speaking, from the tentacles of Brahminical orthodoxy, Pradyot's father could not, however, make good at school. He got, so to say, the worst of both worlds. He introduced onion into his menu, and separate cooking arrangements had to be provided for him and his dubious food. But he could not pass the Entrance examination. His father's name still counted, however, and influential disciples got him a job in a mercantile firm. He arrived soon enough at a kind of compromise; he would have a proper hair-cut in modern style, but would have the Brahminical tuft at the back of his head, and he would supplement his salary by occasionally officiating as priest.

Such, therefore, was Pradyot's father, and he had wanted to bring up his son to be an independent merchant or a broker. The former profession was his particular choice. Rich Bengalis had then just begun to set up offices and start firms of their own. For want of capital, however, Pradyot's father decided that his son should be a Stock Exchange broker. Middlemen, he knew from personal experience, were wanted to facilitate contact between buyer and seller and collect some commission for their pains. In this variety of business, perhaps, a most important item of capital was the gift of the gab, which Pradyot unmistakably possessed. By that time, indeed, Pradyot had turned quite a smart young fellow, he had shed the hereditary Brahminical tuft and had improved on onion by venturing on furtive feasts where chicken, at which the family had shuddered in the past, was the most cherished item on the menu.

Pradyot had shown some promise in his business when

he started, and brought back home a little money with him every day. But he took at once to gluttonous eating; he would entertain friends and be entertained in return at hotels, gorging himself with chops and cutlets, while the souls of his orthodox ancestors ached and sighed!

He changed soon into the business of hire-purchase, and got quite into the habit of buzzing round restaurants and gorging himself with dubious food. It did not take him long to graduate in business methods by filing an insolvency petition and cheating all creditors. Then he stayed back at home, sold his ancestral residence and built in his wife's name a new, smart house. There he would idle away his days, gorging away as ever. No wonder his stomach rebelled, and disease made its habitation there.

This was not all. There started a series of litigation, for he was not expert enough at the job of swindling and there were loopholes which his enemies exploited. And after the Court's final decrees were passed, his bank balance was *nil*, and the house registered in his wife's name had also to be sold. Pradyot could not even then get rid of his gluttony, and for want of cash would eat hot preparations fried in mustard oil, welcome to the palate but poison to his system. It did not take long for him to develop an asthmatic cough.

Even after this, he had got a job and managed somehow to keep body and soul together. Perhaps his days would have gone on the same way—worry, want and interludes of furtive gluttony. But then, of a sudden, came the War in Europe over a slice of Polish land. And soon enough the fire spread all over the continent—a powder-magazine set ablaze. Even India felt the lurid glare, though she was so far away. Thousands of miles and the seven seas separated her from the scene of warfare, but the fire that



had started in Europe melted even the silver and gold in India. Trade got dislocated; retrenchment began in the services, and among the first victims was Pradyot who got the sack. Since then, he had taken refuge in this *bustee*. He could no longer gorge himself with forbidden food, he didn't now have money enough to buy even what was desperately needed. His asthma had become a lot more serious; originating in over-eating, the ailment did not cease to thrive on starvation, and sent its venomous roots to every cell of his ageing body.

His wife Sarojini was rubbing some hot mustard oil on his chest. His eldest son Hiren—a boy of twelve or thirteen—sat near his head and fanned the anguished father. Geeta was busy heating some water, for somebody had advised that Sodi-bicarbonate in hot water relieved the congestion in the chest. There was no soda in the house, but even hot water in itself was, it was hoped, good for the poor sufferer.

The woman who had paid the interest to the Kabuli on Pradyot's behalf—the matrimonial agent—sat nearby. Pretending sympathy, she was talking away. Pradyot, puffing painfully, told her to leave them for a while, but she had something up her sleeve and said, 'Yes, I'm going. But Hiren, you come with me. I shall give you a *seer* of rice. There's nothing in your mother's larder, I see.'

Pradyot turned on the bed, in relief or in agony it was difficult to tell.

#### (IV)

Next morning, when he got ready to go out, Kanai put his hand in his pocket and was startled to see the money gone. Where did it vanish, he wondered, but in a moment

a sardonic smile appeared on his lips. Was there any lack of people who would slink away with the money? But he knew it wasn't any of the maids who had done it. Whoever it was, it wasn't any stranger to the precious family! And even a Sherlock Holmes could not unravel the mystery of the theft! He took a deep breath and went out of the room, wishing to heaven that he never had to come back again.

'Kanool!' He heard his mother's voice and turned round to say, 'Yes, mother, what is it?'

'I came in last night', she said, 'and took four rupees out of your pocket.'

Kanai just stared at his mother, he couldn't say a word, but a kind of cruel brightness was in his eyes.

'You can pay your College fees next month', said his mother, 'why do you stare at me so? You have to think of the family, haven't you?'

Kanai laughed, 'Who'll worry about *me*, mother?'

'You weren't like this before, son. What's happened? Don't you realise that self-abnegation is the highest virtue? What has made you so different these days?'

Kanai did not answer and walked out.

It was Sunday. He could have the whole day to himself, but his pupil's examination was approaching and he thought he would go and help with his preparation. He was somewhat reassured it was a Sunday and offices were closed, so that there was no chance of his meeting Neela on the way.

But he had reckoned without his fate. Even on this day, he met Neela—this time with her brother Nepi, at the corner of Keshab Sen Street. It was the brother who first saw him and pointed him out to Neela. They both

got on to the same tram and spoke to him, 'So you are here, too.'

Kanai seemed to pale and said, 'Yes, so it seems. But where are you going? It's Sunday to-day!'

'But—don't you know? And aren't you going?' Neela looked very surprised.

Suddenly, Kanai remembered. Yes, there was a meeting to-day under the auspices of their Union, a meeting to discuss—perhaps it was better to say, protest against—the inadequate relief provisions in the cyclone-devastated area of Midnapore. Kanai smiled weakly and said, 'Oh! you are referring to the meeting, are you?'

'Yes, of course, you are one of the speakers there, don't you know?'

'But—', he mumbled.

'There can be no "but" about it. How can you keep away?' Neela's voice got excited, she seemed to have forgotten the presence of other people on the tram, 'How can you keep away? Bejoy-da is out of town, and you—even you seem uncertain . . .'

Nepi took Kanai's hand and said in eager tones, 'No, Kanai-da, you've got to come.'

'But', Kanai rejoined, 'what'll be the good of it all? The most I can do is to give a thundering speech, but will that relieve the distressed? And will Government get so flabbergasted that it will forthwith rush adequate assistance? It all looks to me like a pathetic stage-play!'

Neela flared up, 'It all sounds heroic, what you say. But it's just sheer cowardice not to take advantage of whatever opportunities we have to protest and to do all we can to alleviate people's suffering. Yes, it's just cowardice.' She turned her face away and did not wait for Kanai to reply.

Kanai sat without a word. Even Nepi felt dumb-founded. And the other people on the tram drew all the inferences that their vivid imagination supplied them, and were already lapping up an agreeable exchange of views on society and its modern degeneration. They were views which, in the name of criticism, revealed the libido of minds inhibited by a hundred social and religious taboos; swearing by the need of restraint and decorum, they were really revealing dubiously hidden strands of emotion. How people used to manacles seem yet to enjoy licking their fetters!

Stray bits of the general conversation reached Kanai's ears. 'Politics, you know, is quite a game these days—it's a most delightful game'.

Another voice chimed in, 'Yes, and especially the party where these people belong. There are more girls than men there, I'm told'. Sly laughter punctuated these observations.

The tram car stopped alongside College Square. Neela and Nepi got off and hurried to the meeting at the University Institute Hall.

'Hell!', said one, 'Did you see the way she walked down? The whole car shook! Hell!'

Kanai kept on to his seat and stared vacantly into space.

The car moved on, past the Medical College Hospitals and stopped at a street corner. On the left was a temple of *Siva*, and on the right a small crowd of stunned village-folk obviously famished and looking for alms. One of them, a woman, was beating her breast and crying aloud. Kanai got off to see what was the matter.

'Oh my treasure! my darling Sonnie! . . . I had saved him during the storm and the floods . . . and now he's gone! Oh my jewel-child! my own heart!'

They had all come together from Midnapore. Their huts were washed away by the floods and now were a mere earthen mound. Their cattle had also been washed away, and all over the coastal area masses of salt had settled on the ground. There was nothing to eat, not a drop even to drink, for all the water had turned saline. So from distant villages, they had trekked to town in search of food. The little daughter, goaded by hunger, had gone to beg for something to eat, and the emaciated boy, trailing behind his mother, had tried to run across to the other side of the road and got run over by a lorry.

A shopkeeper, who was an eye-witness, was relating how the accident had happened in a split second. 'It was all over before you could shout a warning!'

'Didn't you take down the number of the lorry?' asked one of the crowd that had gathered.

'O, didn't I?' rejoined the shopkeeper, 'Of course I did. It was a flour mill lorry, was carrying enormous bags of flour. Its number was—.'

By this time Kanai had turned round. He did not even feel like waiting for the tram. He quickened his pace and in a little while reached the University Institute. The meeting had already begun. Nepi was at the gate; he was working as a volunteer, busy controlling the crowd that had assembled there. His face brightened up when he saw Kanai, who smiled at him and walked in to take a quiet seat in a corner. At the mike was Nurul Huq, a well-known *Kisan* (peasant movement) worker, speaking excitedly on the peasantry and their rights—"We are men, the rights of man are ours as well . . . we want to live . . . to be free, like men in other lands . . . why must we die? And why must we suffer destitution and disease? . . . It's all a horrid mess, and we condemn it . . ."

Just below the platform was a large table, and around it sat police reporters, meticulously taking down shorthand reports of whatever was said. After the meeting they would go back to their offices, type out the full text of every speech, and scrutiny would be made by omniscient police heads who would decide if a speaker had transgressed the laws of sedition and prosecution should be launched. On the other side there was another table where sat the representatives of the press reporting the proceedings.

When the speaker resumed his seat, Neela came forward and announced that Kanai Chakravarti was to have spoken next, but since he was absent, another worker, Abdur Rahman would speak in his stead. "We know", she added, "that nothing will happen as a result of speeches made here. But we will not renounce our right of protesting against wrongs. To say that protests are unavailing and to give way to pathetic inaction and utter demoralisation is, like paralysis, a most terrible affliction. Even cowards have a chance of achieving some courage and can then face up to danger. But whoever has got this affliction is dead; life lingers in him, but he is dead, just dead!"

Kanai had left his seat and was walking up the gangway towards the platform. Neela's eyes fell on him and she turned pale. The Chairman whispered, 'It's Kanai Babu coming', and pointed in his direction. Neela, however, kept quiet, and the Chairman himself went up to the mike and said, 'Kanai Babu has arrived. According to the programme, therefore, he will be speaking now. He will be followed by Mr. Rahman.'

Kanai now faced the mike. He did not say very much, but he described the incident he had just witnessed. "This little boy" he said, "had come from Midnapore to Calcutta in quest of food, and was run over by a lorry loaded with

foodstuff. It reminded me of what Rabindranath Tagore had written, in his famous letter to Miss Rathbone, "The whole might of the British navy", said our poet, "is engaged in conveying food vessels to the English shores, and our people perish of hunger and not a cart-load of rice is brought to their door from a neighbouring district!"'

He went out as soon as he had finished his speech.

Nepi was at the door, near the main entrance. He took Kanai's hands in his, and said in a voice fairly choked by emotion—'It was a great speech, Kanai-da'. He did not say anything more, he never could, for he was highly strung, and his face would plainly register his quick emotions but he never could put them in words. There was in Nepi's character a quiet modesty which made his abundant vitality so unostentatious, his tireless work so unadorned with frills.

'I'm so happy you liked it', said Kanai, and Nepi smiled shyly. 'Well, I'm off', Kanai added. 'One moment, Kanai-da', said Nepi, 'the Party is sending a squad of relief workers to Midnapore. Why don't you come along as its leader? . . . —And—he could not finish his sentence, but Kanai could guess what was in his mind and said smiling: 'You want me to recommend you for Party membership, isn't it?' Nepi nodded affirmation, but Kanai sighed and said, 'Yes, I'll do it, but you see, I can't go to Midnapore. I've got to look after this pupil of mine, his examination is approaching.'

He remembered it was getting late and said goodbye and walked away.

Nepi stood there, quietly absorbed. Rahman's speech could be heard over the mike. But he was not listening. There was something rather pathetic in Kanai's tone of voice that perturbed him. It was only when Neela called out to him that he collected himself.

'Nepi', his sister asked him. 'Has Kanai Babu left?'

'Yes', he replied.

Neela stood there for a few moments and then pulled herself up, as it were, and walked back to the hall.

Kanai was worrying over what Nepi had told him. His life seemed to be turning towards senseless pathos. Work was calling out to him, and yet he was bound by a thousand ties to the family. His mother wanted him, it seemed, to abjure his idealism and adopt hers. It was for the family that he had to keep on to the job he had. It wasn't worth anybody's while . . . He was startled out of his thoughts as he crossed College Street. What? Was it the siren? Air-raid Warning? . . .

He discovered his mistake presently. It wasn't an air-raid warning, but American military lorries blaring away in row after row.

Across the road was a 'control' shop, and an impossible queue had formed there. A queue of women—Hindus, Muslims, Hindusthanis and Bengalis, 'touchables' and 'untouchables', widows, wives and unmarried girls, all jostling together in unaccustomed formation. Their veil had vanished, their hair was crumpled in the crush and was flying about in the winter breeze; their faces registered immeasurable worry, their one thought being that of reaching the shop counter at some future time! They looked so intently at their objective and gave thought to nothing else . . . Will the veil be vanishing for ever? thought Kanai; perhaps out of all this misery they will win freedom from their toils? A flicker of a smile crossed Kanai's lips. On the other pavement were a crowd of homeless destitutes—not one of them a professional beggar, but all reduced to worse than beggary. . .



It was all so strange, so harrowing. Never before in history had such sights been seen, and the end of it all seemed so distant, so hazy, so uncertain. . . How relentless was total War! How it drains away the treasure of years, the fund of human vitality! How the accumulated misery of years and years has gripped in a vice all the world's people! . . . And especially the people of this country, the hopeless, helpless people of this hopeless, helpless country! . . .

(V)

Like so many other outworn things, the family of the Chakravartis was heading towards ruin. After all, its habitation was not beyond the area of this troubled world. Melancholy plans were being made to sell off the few remaining plots of beggarly *bustee* land which the family still owned.

For the last fortnight or so, however, a change seemed to have come over the troubled world in which Geeta and her family lived. The old woman would come pretty often and gossip with everybody. Pradyot's shrill shouts were rarely heard. Kanai began to think well of the old woman.

One day Kanai's sister Uma told him that perhaps Geeta would be getting married very soon. 'Married?', asked Kanai in some surprise, but his sister replied, 'Yes, the *Ghataki* (the go-between in arranged marriages) comes to their house very often'.

Kanai knew that, that was the old woman's profession, but he had not thought of Geeta getting married. The *Ghataki* alone, he knew, could not bring about a wedding; the first essential for that was money. And yet, he thought,

perhaps Uma was right. After all, there were some people who would agree to marry without a dowry. And surely, Geeta was the kind of girl who deserved an act of kindness. . . Yes, she deserved it all right; she hardly had the strength to accept anything but kindness. . .

'Kanool', he heard his mother's voice. She had come up to his room, the same piteous look on her face, the same indifference to suffering, in her eyes a straining after self-effacement.

'Yes, mother!' smiled Kanai.

'Is it time yet for you to get your month's salary, son?'

'No, mother, to-day's only the fifteenth.'

'But—the money's badly needed, Kanoo', she said softly.

'Oh well, if I ask for payment in advance, I might get it, but the point is—'

'No, son, there can't be any 'but' about it.'

'You see, mother, I am in arrears with my College fees.'

'But didn't you tell me once, Kanoo, that you can pay three or four months' fees together?'

'Yes, I can, but where shall I get all that money together?'

His mother sighed ; after a while she said, "You'll have to find a way out, Kanoo. Couldn't you get another pupil to coach in the evening?'

Kanai felt as if he could break out into a laugh. If he had said that after all he also wanted some time for his own studies, his mother would speak quietly of family obligations which must be self-sacrificingly performed. So he forbore contradicting her and said, 'All right, let me see.'

'Come and have a cup of tea', smiled his mother, 'and don't forget bringing the money to-day, sonnie.'

Up in the sky a heavy roar was getting nearer and nearer—a flock of airplanes. The children of the house

jumped about in excitement and began counting the number—'One, two, three, four . . . oh, how many!'

Kanai looked up. Yes, it was a large formation, must be no less than fifty or sixty together. He went in, had his tea, then went out again and walked towards the tram lines. Destitutes were everywhere, huddling together on the pavements wherever there was a suggestion of a shelter. Their number seemed to be piling up every day, and so did Calcutta's population.

Suddenly he heard a voice—'Kanai-Babul' It was a girl's voice—Neela's voice. Kanai saw her coming from the direction of a lane branching off the main road. He had not seen her since that morning meeting at the University Institute. 'You here?' he asked her in some surprise; he did not expect to see her so early in the morning.

'Yes, and why not?', Neela smiled, 'but you see I am looking for Nepi.'

'Nepi? But where's he now? When did he come back from Midnapore?'

'He returned after a week and then disappeared again. Father is furious, and mother is most terribly worried. So I had come to ask Ramen if he knew my precious brother's whereabouts. At the Party Office, I heard that Ramen had come back yesterday.'

Ramen was the same age as Nepi, an enthusiastic member of the Party, a real comrade of Nepi's.

'So you did get news of Nepi', said Kanai.

'Yes', said Neela. 'He's supposed to be reaching by this morning's train'. She added with a smile, 'You know, Kanai Babu, it's all my fault, it seems. Mother will blame me. Father does not interfere very much with me or our work, but Nepi seems to be running like mad. When

father asks me about him, I really can't help feeling rather guilty. It was me who's got him into the Party.'

'But surely, Miss Sen, Nepi can't be up to any mischief', smiled Kanai. 'You shouldn't feel any guilt for his sake, then, should you?'

Neela did not reply, there was no need of it either. But she felt consoled, as it were, by Kanai's words.

'Let's go', said Kanai, 'You're going home, I expect.'

'Yes', said Neela.

Kanai walked alongside her and spoke after a while, 'Do you know, Miss Sen, what seems to me to be the great tragedy of our lives?' He smiled sadly.

Neela did not speak, but waited to hear him answer his own question.

'Yes, Miss Sen, this tragedy is our inability to live up to what we cherish as our ideals . . . so often we fail to break the bonds of the environment in which we live. It isn't the environment which is to blame, really; it's our own emotions. It's our many attachments, our affection and love for those who are near to us, . . . But Nepi, you know, is a wonderful lad, he's so young and yet at so early an age, he has got over so many hurdles that pull us back at every step. . . It's amazing, but he really has won his freedom . . .'

With a smile Neela put in, 'But you never notice any fault in Nepi, do you?'

'No, I don't really', he smiled back.

'But how can I cease to think of my parents?', rejoined Neela, 'You know my father, don't you? He's such a very tolerant man, never breathes a word against our kind of work—'

By this time a tram car had arrived and both of them got in. There was a crowd inside, and Kanai had to

remain standing, while Neela got a seat next to an old lady.

Neela had not finished what she wanted to say. She continued to think of her father and looked vacantly into space.

Neela and her people lived in Keshab Sen Street. The car drew up in front of College Street Market, but Neela did not get off, though that was the nearest stop for her. A little further on, at College Square, she got up and said to Kanai, 'Let's go'.

Even a few mono-syllabic questions would have provoked a buzz of suggestive comment from leering fellow-passengers. Kanai, therefore, asked no question and got off too. They entered College Square, and Kanai suggested that they might sit down somewhere.

Neela did not answer, but looking him full in the face, said: 'I have an apology to offer you, haven't I?'

'But why? What are you talking about?'

'It's what I said at the University Institute the other day', she said.

Kanai laughed and interrupted her, 'O, that! That was perfectly alright. You had said nothing about me in particular, you were only making some general observations.'

'No', she objected with a kind of vehemence in her tone, 'I referred to you and I admit it'.

Kanai did not speak. They were walking at a slow pace. Presently, Neela said softly: 'Kanai Babu!'

'You weren't to blame', said Kanai, 'if you had said all that about me in particular. I'm not doing my job properly, Miss Sen. I know it badly enough. I have an

uncomfortable conscience which is very, very dissatisfied the way I'm going.'

Neela felt a surge of sympathy. 'What is it, Kanai-Babu, that perturbs you so much? Couldn't you possibly tell me?'

'Well', Kanai drew a weary breath, 'it's our family.' . .

'But why?', she asked in real surprise.

'It's a long story, as I've just told you. And besides—'

Neela waited for him to continue, but when he did not, asked quietly, 'Yes, comrade?'

'Oh let it be, comrade . . . may be, I shall tell you later, some other time.'

Neela did not speak, but after a while Kanai spoke again. 'Perhaps . . . perhaps I shan't—' He could not finish the sentence, but he wanted to say that he was perhaps going to be insane, he did not hope to continue a normal person. He could not say it, but after a few paces he looked up at the clock on the swimming club facade and said, 'It's getting rather late, Miss Sen, I must be going. Cheerio!'

He hastened on towards College Street. Neela stood for a while, clinging to the railing which ran round the enormous pond. Then she too recalled it was getting late for her to reach the office.

Back home, she saw at the door a good little crowd. She was not disturbed at the sight, for she heard the strains of a voice singing inside the house. She knew it was her father's whim to ask beggars from the street to come into the house, if they could sing or had any special gifts. He could not much indulge his whim in these days of high prices, and was supremely sorry on that account. Neela knew it all, though Devaprasad, her father, never put this

feeling in so many words. On the contrary, whenever out of exuberance of spirit he brought in one of his beggar invitees, he would hasten, embarrassed fashion, to offer excuses, and particularly to Neela! For these days, he seemed to want to offer excuses to Neela on all matters relating to the management of the family's affairs. Neela could sense the reason why: it was because she paid out of her salary part of the expense of running the household. Neela would be hurt at her father's deference, but both would hide their feeling and pretend appearing normal.

'Come along, Neela!', said her father as soon as he caught sight of her, 'come along and listen to this beggar-boy. And do you know, child, he's composed the song himself. He's only the son of a village beggar!'

'No, sir, we aren't beggars', protested the boy, who had stopped singing at Devaprasad's ejaculation. 'No, sir, we aren't beggars. We belong to Burdwan district and my father's a tenant-farmer. It's this horrid war, sir, which has thrown us on to the streets. . . What price rice these days, sir, you know very well. It's like fire, we can't touch it. You can get a *Seer* for no less than eight annas! . . . My father now goes about in search of work . . . and me? Well, I haven't got one arm. Look, sir!' He put out a shrivelled hand, a lifeless twig as it were. He laughed and continued, 'You see, I lost my mother long ago, and father . . . well, he doesn't bother to look after me—and of course, it's hard to buy food these days, he can't get enough to eat for himself . . . So I've been living on the streets, I sing and get a few coppers and carry on . . . Oh yes, I'll go home, when all this war bother is over. And if it goes on for ever, well, one day I'll die on the streets.' He lay on the ground, put out his tongue, threw his eyes out of the socket, and pretended to be dead. A

strange child! How he laughed at the idea of death on the street, and laughed without the slightest self-consciousness or pose!

A hush seemed to have come over everybody at the boy's flow of talk.

He continued, 'Listen, O mother, listen to this song. It's about airplanes. You must have seen them. Of course you must, you are big folk and the Calcutta sky's never without them machines. Listen, now, listen . . .'

A diminutive tom-tom was his one-handed accompaniment, and he sang:

'What a huge and queer machine

Flies about in the sky!

Have you heard it tell? There's a  
murderous bomb in its bowels!

Its forty-cubit wings, its pilots three  
and countless engines—oh, it's queer!

The pilot looks through a telescope, looks  
and drops his load!

And Calcutta's prosperous citizens, fat and greasy,

Run frantically away from the danger of death

from the skies;

Only the poor stay put, they've neither home nor

food nor raiment,

But they wait for their destiny—death on the streets!

And the Japs come, on top of it all, and

rain death all over the place!

'I'll take down the song', said Neela. Devaprasad's eyes were filling with tears. 'Neela, it's nearly nine', said her mother from inside the kitchen. 'You go, my child', said Devaprasad, 'I'm taking it down for you'.

Neela's father, Devaprasad Sen was an idealist. After



taking his M.A. in philosophy he had read law and qualified for the Bar. That was the biggest mistake of his life. Philosophy peeps so uncomfortably between his twin allegiance to idealism and his profession that conflicts always ensue. Like a never-ending partition suit between branches of the same family, this conflict goes on for ever, neither side agrees to a compromise or wins an outright victory. If between the two, clad like Nala and Damayanti in the same sparse cloak, philosophy could by a few deft razor strokes bring about a fine split-up, Devaprasad would surely have been happy, but on the contrary, the mother of sciences played the role of the ancient sage *Narada* who liked nothing so much as provoking a quarrel! No wonder, then, that Devaprasad was a failure in the profession. It was not that he lacked ability. After all, his devotion to his ideals was proof of his character. But he could never be happy in the atmosphere of the law courts. Till lately, however, he had earned enough to carry on without much worry. He had given his sons and his daughter equal facilities for education. Amar, his eldest son, had appeared in any number of service examinations after he took his M.A., but after experiencing a sequence of failures, landed himself at a school with the job of a teacher on fifty meagre rupees a month. The first shock of the War had brought in retrenchment, and he was now drawing only thirtyfive.

Devaprasad's income also had suffered lately a similar eclipse. Few among the public could these days afford the preliminary expenses needed for adjudication in a court of law. He had a few clients who were landlords, and had often to appear on their behalf in suits for ejection or arrears of rent. But the air raid scare had started a craze for evacuation, and Calcutta landlords would hardly dare

press their tenants for payment of rent, not to speak of instituting suits for arrears.

It was not that Devaprasad much regretted this state of affairs. He was never happy with his work in the courts. There were instances when, right in the middle of the proceedings, he withdrew from the case because of having discovered his client's evil machinations and deceit. He had never before felt any special discontent at his meagre earnings, but the position had deteriorated so that he could hardly earn his family's keep.

His household had always been run on frugal lines. It was only in regard to the children's education that he would spend liberally. The elder son had passed his M.A. He never put any obstacles in the way of his daughter Neela proceeding with her work at College. He never nursed the motive of thereby getting for her a prosperous son-in-law. But of course he hoped that in case it was necessary Neela also would be able to earn for herself and help to ease the chronic problem of keeping up appearances in a middle-class household. He would look hopefully at the growing expansion of women's education in Calcutta, and would think of the time when Neela would perhaps be teaching somewhere, going to her job of a morning after she had prepared food for her husband and sent him off to work. He could never conceive of Neela working for her living in any other capacity than that of a teacher. When Neela had applied for a job and informed her father that she had got it, he had felt deeply hurt. She had not told him before she applied; she had seen how the family suffered in the changed economic environment brought about by the War, and had quietly gone about seeking employment in one of the many offices set up for war purposes. Devaprasad had said nothing, but he could not

help thinking that perhaps Neela had acquired, along with her University education, expensive habits of dress and toilet, and wanted a job to meet her bills. He had a kind of shock when at the end of a month's work, Neela brought him her full salary and made obeisance at his feet. She had deducted only fifteen rupees which was the cost of her daily transport and tea during the recess at office.

Devaprasad was the type of the strong, silent man. He had not shed a tear even when two of his children had died. But he could not resist his tears when Neela handed him her salary.

His younger son Nepi had now come to be the greatest source of worry and sorrow to him. He had passed the I.Sc. examination, and was supposed to be reading for the degree in science. But he was busy all his waking hours, with politics. For sometime, he had even stopped coming back home at night. Devaprasad had not even seen his son for a month or so. Nepi would come, when he returned at all, at midnight and quietly call Neela. The last time his father saw him was when he was tossing in bed, sleepless, and heard the truant patriot call out quietly to Neela. That time he got terribly angry. 'Get away, get away from here,' he had shouted, 'don't open the door to him, Neela, I warn you!'

Neela had come down to open the door, but was dumbfounded. Her mother had come behind her, but even she did not dare open the door. Devaprasad also had followed them. But Nepi had spoken strangely. To Neela he said quietly, 'You don't have to open the door, but I'm famishing, Neela. Let me have some food out of the window . . . I'll eat it out here and go.'

On that occasion, however, Devaprasad had himself opened the door, and told Nepi tersely: 'I forgive you this

time, but if you want to loaf about with whatever is your politics in this fashion . . don't come back again'. For two weeks since then, there was no news of Nepi. He had come, it seemed, for a little while one night, but his father had not seen him. Had Neela also got mixed up in political work? He wondered, and could not see the way out. Wasn't there a vital link-up between education and political consciousness? And how could he prevent Neela if she developed political interest? There was a way out—perhaps. If only he could get Neela a snug little nest of her own, perhaps in wedded bliss which all women ache for, she would have ceased thinking of the world's problems! He had failed even to do that, Devaprasad would think, with a sigh.

Neela came up to him, on her way to work, and said very quietly, 'Dad, Nepi'll be coming tonight.'

## (VI)

When Kanai's grandmother awaited with anxiety the advent of the new moon or of the full moon, because she believed in mysterious planetary conjunctions accentuating the gout on her ancient body, Kanai would tease her and laugh it away. 'What has your poor leg got to do with the new moon?' he would ask her playfully, while she fretted at his irreverence for scriptural pronouncements. Kanai, anyhow, was a student of science, and had no faith in planetary effects on human destiny or that physical distempers were caused by astral influences. But he could not help thinking of the morning meeting with Neela as anything but a portent of misfortune; he had no doubts that he was going to be in for some trouble or other. So

ready for whatever vagaries of fortune confronted him, he reached his pupil's place. He was already at least an hour late. After the meeting with Neela, he had thought at one time of skipping his daily appointment with the pupil, but he remembered his mother's hesitant adjuration that the larder was empty and fairly rushed to his pupil's. He wanted the month's salary in advance, he wanted it badly. And apart from the family's requirements, another secret longing for a little money to spend had risen of itself in his mind. He must, he thought, ask Neela to coffee one of these days and as soon as possible.

His pupil's people belonged to the class of the *nouveaux riche*. They had a big, well-kept house, built on modern lines, with marble flooring, a fashionable American stair-case, ferro-concreted ceiling with gaudy embossments, varied and costly furniture, several automobiles, expensive dogs, a close-mown lawn encasing the house—altogether a picture of prosperity. The head of the family was the man who had brought it all about—a self-made man of the Samuel Smiles pattern. He had begun with a modest trade in timber, had gone on to buy and sell incredible quantities of tamarind and cotton, of mica and iron, and the Devil knows what other commodities, and had built out of his earnings this paragon of bricks and mortar and prosperity. And he had actually given the house the name 'Paragon' inscribed on marble at one end of the gate and at the other end on glass which an electric bulb fitted underneath illumined like letters of gold.

Along the verandah were stacks of sandbags for air raid protection. You had to pick your way through them to the living rooms. Kanai knew it well and went up to his pupil's study. Here also were sand bags heaped near the main apertures ; the lights were beautifully shaded by

well-designed A.R.P. contrivances. On the glass of the book-cases lining the room were stuck strips of cloth as precaution against blast. Inside them were books, mainly English and published abroad—from encyclopaedias and 'books of knowledge' to anthologies of modern poetry. Kanai had been astonished when he went there first; he had not expected such an atmosphere of learning and refinement. But peeping into the glass and running over the titles, he had happened once to touch the book and quite involuntarily his finger had made an effort to move the lid on the keyhole. It refused obstinately to budge, and he looked and saw the lock jammed in rust. Even in his surprise, he could not help laughing; on all the book-cases the locks were in just the same predicament.

The pupil was absent. Of course, his examinations were over, and there was no special urgency about studies. But the head of the house never liked such slackness. He had an idea that this child of his should not enter business; he wanted him to grow into a genius, so that all over the country he would be known as a scholar, a pearl of a man! Of course, his two elder sons were not without education, they could speak and write English fairly well too, and since nothing succeeds like success, they had a good deal of credit in the market. But while they were, to their father, as good as gold, the old man wanted his youngest son to be like a peerless diamond. And so he never liked the genius-to-be to slacken in his studies. He had appointed four tutors to coach him in Mathematics, English, Sanskrit, history and other subjects. In spite of all this pampering, however, Kanai was fond of the lad. He had been brought up in an atmosphere of plenty, but instead of the plump comeliness of prosperity, his body was growing to be a picture of muscular strength and healthy grace. He was

vivacious and at the same time very polite ; his intelligence was of average quality but he had a strong intellectual curiosity. A kind of cynicism had become something of a habit with Kanai, but his young pupil was one of those who seemed to be able to make him relent. The lad had been to Kanai's place several times. He was astonished to see the vanished scene of Sukhamay Chakravarti's fickle prosperity. Since then, he could never bring himself to pay his salary directly to Kanai. At the close of the month, he would come up with an envelope on which his father's initials were embossed and say shyly, 'Here's a letter for you, sir'. Kanai was accustomed to this, and carefully put the envelope in his pocket. But the first time he was rather taken aback and had said, 'Letter? For me?'

'Yes', Asoka had replied, 'Father has given it for you'. And he had hurried towards the inner apartments. Kanai had torn open the envelope, and saw three ten-rupee notes neatly folded inside.

The head of the house had come up himself and said. 'I say, *Master Mashai*, you should have told me, you're Sukhamoy Chakravarti's grandson. You should have told me', he repeated.

Kanai had almost given a rather caustic reply, but he checked himself and answered politely with a smile. 'There has hardly been any occasion for mentioning my family credentials, has there?'

Asoka's father had not listened. He was recalling the past and spoke on, as if in a trance: 'You weren't born then, *Master Mashai*, even we were quite young those days. When Sukhamay Chakravarti's sons—your grandfathers, that is to say, drove their coach-and-four, there would be crowds lining the streets.' He sighed and added, 'Isn't fortune fickle? The *Kosala* of the Raghus, the *Mathura* of

the Jadus even have vanished . . . we are but small fry!'

Kanai did not attempt a reply. He did not quite know what anxieties were behind the old man's musings on the impermanence of things. Was it a sort of wistful tenderness for a past that will never return or was it the fearful anticipation of the inevitable dissolution in the future of his present prosperity? After a little while, the muscles on the old man's face had hardened, and looking Kanai full in the face he had said, 'My properties will never be partitioned, I'm preparing a trust deed, so that none of my reversionaries can sell away anything.' 'Only those who would work for the trust will be entitled to an allowance', he added, trying to brighten up.

A smile had flickered on Kanai's face. The old man looked pathetic as he spoke of his plan to shackle the inexorable forces of time in the coils of legal technicalities.

Alone in his pupil's study, Kanai turned over these thoughts in his mind. Had Asoka's father anticipated the ways of this war? If he had at all, he must have calculated in terms of the 1914-18 War, he must have thought only of piling profits. He couldn't have thought of black-outs, air-raid warnings, enemy planes on home skies, military retreats and panicky evacuation by civilians. Kanai was not sure if he thought even now of such uncomfortable things; he had his doubts, for lately the old man had started a good deal of new business, he had even begun a trade in foodgrains, stacked enormous quantities of paddy and rice in large, scattered godowns. He had hoarded sugar and wheat also, Kanai's pupil had told him.

A servant came up to him and interrupted his musings: '*Karta* (head of the family) wishes to see you, please'.



For a moment, Kanai thought that this shark of a profiteer wanted him perhaps to explain his delay. He felt unwontedly fierce ; but all he could do was to let fall a sigh and tell the servant, 'Yes, I'm coming'.

The old man's sitting-room was furnished in dual style. On one side were settees and sofas and deep lounge chairs, all from a first class European firm, and on the other side, coverlets spread out in Indian style.

It was not quite the good old Indian style, however ; there were a number of square-shaped seats which looked like a small dais and were arranged like chairs around a table. On each seat was a well-fitting eiderdown covered over with bright yellow sheets and cushions to match. Alongside each seat was a small table on which were white stone casks and glasses, instead of ash-trays and flower-vases which could be seen at the other end of the room. On one side of the wall hung a few pictures by a famous Bengali painter who had resurrected the old *pat* motif and style. On another side were pictures by foreign artists.

The head of the house was leaning back on a cushion and smoking a long, winding *hookah*, luxuriously drawing the smoke through the water in a vase several yards away, to which the flexible tube was attached. A headphone was attached to his ears, for he was listening to some Radio broadcast and did not want the sound to reach outside. In the house there were two wireless sets, one for Indian and the other for foreign broadcasts. As Kanai entered, the old man put down his headphone and smiled at him : 'Here you are, my boy. Congratulations! Your pupil has done well at his exams.'

Asoka had stood third in order of merit at the examination scoring top marks in mathematics. Kanai was genuinely glad to hear of it. 'Where is Asoka?' he asked.

'Haven't you seen him yet?' He went to your place this morning'.

'I see', said Kanai, 'but I left home early and was held up on the way'.

'He'll be coming back presently. Let's have a chat in the meantime.' He rang the bell and a servant came up. 'Get us some tea,' he said, 'and something to eat, for *Master Mashai*'.

Kanai protested he was not hungry. 'I'll just have a cup of tea', he said.

The old man smiled and shook his head. 'No, oh, no. You've got to eat something too, to-day. And besides, you have to tell me, when you've eaten, where the sweets were made'. He laughed and before Kanai could say anything, added, 'You see these days Calcutta sweets have squeezed out of the market sweets which used to be made in the districts. But they were famous once—the *Manohara* of Kandy and Janai, the *Sandesh* of Guptipara, the *Kadma* of Mankara, the *Feni* of Dubrajpur . . . What you will be eating is the *Manohara* of Kandy'.

It was really delicious, and Kanai said, 'Once I tried the Janai *Manohara* at my aunt's place, but this tastes better. But the sugar coating on top is a little too hard'.

'It has to be a little hard, you see, for it keeps the rich clotted cream inside in tip-top condition'. The old man suddenly lowered his voice and added, 'You'd be well advised to keep a good stock of sugar these days, you know'.

Kanai looked blankly at him and asked no questions.

The old man went on, 'In a few days you won't get any sugar in the market.' He puffed leisurely away and said, 'Wheat-products, rice . . . well, prices will soon be soaring like anything'. He smiled mysteriously; the devil

alone knows, Kanai thought, what humour he saw in the situation.

'Will you come into business?' Kanai was suddenly asked. He did not know what to say in reply, but the old man continued, 'You are Sukhamoy Chakravarti's great-grandson, and now you are working as a tutor on thirty rupees a month! It gives me a sort of an ache . . . Didn't the great Bankim say that it's for Bengalis to help fellow-Bengalis, didn't he? Well, we ought to help you. Besides, Asoka is very fond of you.'

Kanai's mind was wandering, he could see as it were the pallor on his mother's face, the early stamp of strain on the faces of his brothers and sisters, Sukhamoy Chakravarti's ramshackle residence.

Asoka's father continued talking. 'You set up in business and I'll help you. That is, I'll let you have stocks of rice, sugar and wheat products on loan . . . D'you know the price of rice to-day? It's fourteen rupees. Well, tomorrow, it'll go up to perhaps sixteen . . . Now, if you buy a good stock today and sell it off tomorrow, you make a clear profit of two rupees on every maund. Let me see, if you buy and sell fifty maunds every day, you make a hundred, that means three thousand a month, thirtysix thousand a year . . . It's not so bad!'

The blood tingled in Kanai's veins, he felt a sort of morbid excitement, beads of perspiration stood out on the palm of his hand. In his mind's eye he envisaged his mother in a silk *Sari*, bedecked with ornaments, her youth as it were resurrected, the smile of happiness on her face. He saw his brothers and sisters dressed in bright new clothes, the doctor's syringe injecting into their limbs the antidote to inherited poison and cleansing the organism of hereditary impurities. He saw Sukhamoy Chakravarti's

tumbledown mansion repaired and reconditioned, and on Calcutta's streets the family's new-fangled chariot, an expensive automobile.

The old man went on excitedly, 'Do you know, my boy, you just can't imagine how much we could have made out of war conditions if only we were free. It's the European companies which grab the lion's share of the profit. They control the keyboard of the trade mechanism, and yet we are by no means inferior to them . . .'

'Yes', he added, 'you set up in business, I'll help you alright'.

'I shall let you know tomorrow', said Kanai and he got up in his excitement, forgetting even to collect his month's salary.

'One moment', said the old man, and took out an envelope from under one of the cushions. 'Here's a little gift for you—from Asoka'. He smiled whimsically and added, 'You see, I had secured a contract for military supplies in Asoka's name. It has brought him a pretty pile—all in return for hemp rope coils!' He got up and said, 'Let's go and have a look at the masons working outside'.

The two of them went out together. The old man was quite garrulous and said laughingly, 'You have performed the impossible, *Master Mashai!*'

Kanai stared at him uncomprehendingly. The old man added, as if with circumspection: 'You see, everybody in our family takes to arithmetic—the calculation of rupees, annas and pies. It's in our blood, you know. But geometry and algebra—well, they are different propositions. They are part of higher mathematics, eh? But your pupil has scored full marks in both . . .'

If Kanai had to listen on any other day to this kind

of talk, he could hardly resist laughter. But to-day he could not laugh. He walked on, as if in a trance.

There was a row of rooms in a corner of the compound near the roadside. They were temporary erections where masonry materials used to be stacked when the house was built. Lately they were left vacant, but now baffle walls were being put up in front. 'I'm going to build an Air Raid Shelter for the public here', the old man informed Kanai. A bricklayer came up and showed him the inscription which was going to be put up on the wall. It ran: 'Public Air Raid Shelter—provided by Rai B. Mukherjee Bahadur'.

When he had left the house, Kanai tore open the envelope and saw that there was a hundred-rupee note inside.

## (VII)

Kanai changed the hundred-rupee note on his way back home.

He bought a pair of *Kabuli* sandals at eight rupees and eight annas; it was well-made and worth the price. He also needed to buy some *dhotis* and *Kortas*, but he could not make up his mind about their price and style. The difference between the price of mill-made and hand-woven *dhotis* was very little these days; the price of handloom products had not risen in the same proportion as mill products, and the Bengali middle-class had begun to wear hand-woven *dhotis* in preference. One did not mind paying twelve rupees instead of ten, when one could at the same time get a sort of aesthetic satisfaction by using hand-woven apparel. On another day, perhaps, Kanai would not

have wasted any worries on such purchases, but his talk with Asoka's father, his quiet, calculated anticipation of thirtysix thousand a year as his likely income and the present of a hundred rupees, had given a certain unwonted tinge to his thoughts. Walking home, he had almost solved the problem agitating his mind. He would listen to the old man's counsel; the miseries of his family, especially of his mother, had grown intolerable, he would sacrifice his idealistic ambitions and plunge into business. And so he could not make up his mind about buying *dhotis*. Once he even thought of buying a cheap suit—wouldn't European clothes be more helpful in business? Of course, at the same time, he had thought of Marwari businessmen and Bengali dealers in rice and paddy—clad unostentatiously in a short *dhoti*, a vest and a *chaddar* or a turban on the head . . . . Kanai worried about such things and could not decide on buying any clothes for himself. He purchased a pair of red-bordered *saris* for his mother and hurried out of the shop.

When he reached home, he saw his mother eagerly awaiting his return. He gave his mother the *saris* he had bought for her and an additional fifty rupees. 'D'you want me to go to the market now, mother?', he asked. 'No', she said softly, 'it will do if you go in the afternoon.' 'Right', said Kanai, and was about to move on, when she asked, in the same quiet tone, 'Isn't there some more money?'

Kanai looked at her in surprise. She said, 'You see, Asoka was here sometime back, and he said you've been given a present of a hundred rupees.'

He could hardly find any words to express what he felt. He just made a gesture, emptying his pockets and giving all there was to his mother. This time she did not count, but she took it all without a word and walked away. Kanai

sat down listlessly on the floor. This little incident had scared his soul as it were . . . it was so humiliating, he felt.

He was not to be left alone with his thoughts, however. His little sister Uma came in; pretty as a picture, at fifteen she had the kind of beauty which, like a painting on the wall, fills a room with a quiet bewitchment. Kanai would often call her in and talk, when he felt miserable. He brightened up at seeing her and said, 'Hullo, what's the news?'

Smiling shyly and needlessly toying with the hem of her *sari* she answered him: 'Didn't you know, your student was here a little while ago?'

'Who? Asoka?'

'Yes', she said, 'He said he had stood first in mathematics at the examination', and then in a tone of loving tenderness, she asked, 'Now you must give me a pair of glass bangles, mustn't you?'

Kanai smiled a little. 'You've got a hundred rupees', said Uma, and before he could reply, his father, noisily moving in his slippers, came into the room and said without a word of ado: 'You've got a hundred rupees, why not give me ten?'

The son knew very well to what use the father would put the money. Kanai's brow darkened. With an effort he controlled himself, and said, 'I've given everything over to mother.' In his excitement he pulled open his pockets and showed they were empty. His father walked away.

Kanai had not noticed that Uma also had left in the meanwhile. He wanted to seek her out and was determined to give her what she asked of him. As he went in search of her, he met his aunt, wife of Sukhamoy Chakravarti's younger grandson. She too came of a family like theirs, dreaming penuriously of by-gone days of plenty.

Her features were sharp, and in every movement, in every glance, in every nuance of speech, she showed caustically her contempt for the family she had married into. And she had beauty, beauty enough to carry off her hauteur. She had even tamed her drunkard husband, and to everybody in the house she seemed to have won the right to move about as a sort of triumphant heroine. As she saw Kanai she smiled and said, 'You treat us to a picture one day, Karrool!'

'Alright', said Kanai and tried to move on.

'I won't have your alright; when is it to be?'

She made a characteristic grimace: 'I see, you'll wait for the interest out of your hundred rupees, isn't that so?' She leaned over the railing on the verandah and made a gesture of contempt.

Kanai felt a sudden gush of exasperation. Every limb of his body tingled in sheer indignation. Failing to find anything to say in retort, he stood rooted to where he was. And suddenly, he heard the sound of suppressed laughter and turning behind was utterly flabbergasted. Who did he see but the eighteen-year-old halfwit, grandson of Mejababu, admiring in a mirror the reflection of his naked limbs and laughing in queer contentment? Kanai felt as if his head was on fire, but he had to keep himself in check. This precious person was pampered beyond words. Some devil of an astrologer had pored over his horoscope and predicted confidently that the halfwit had been in another birth a very great man and his soul, suffering an unmerited curse, had transmigrated to the person of this imbecile! So everybody in the family was expected to do homage to this would-be marvel, and to the older people the imbecile's naked obscenities were only a symptom of divine indifference to forms and conventions! . . . Kanai felt choked by



hatred and by anger. And fearing to lose his self-control, he hurried away from the spot.

'Kanoo!' the voice of his great-aunt interrupted him from behind. He turned round and saw her, bent over by gout, leaning across the railing and with a complete lack of expression on her face or hesitation in her voice, said, 'Will you lend me ten rupees, Kanoo? I hear you've got a hundred rupees.'

'No', said Kanai, quite in a rude voice, and hurried towards his own room. He almost caught Juthi, Mejababu's granddaughter, rushing out just in time. The poor girl also had a queer streak, and whenever she had a chance, would go out into the street and beg of passers-by to give her something. She had evidently come to the room to make a thorough search of Kanai's belongings and to take what she could. Kanai saw on the floor his clothes strewn carelessly, his monthly tram-ticket and all other papers thrown out of his pockets to be ransacked. Only a bitter smile formed itself involuntarily on Kanai's face.

It took him some time to recover himself, and when he did, he could only let fall a sigh. What a mess had Sukhomoy Chakravarti's legacy come to? Had he practised such deception on all and sundry that their cruelties and curses were bearing their evil fruit?

From the second floor of the old, dilapidated house floated the high-pitched voice of Mejababu. 'Hum', the old man was saying, '. . . those were days . . . when I came back from the registry office after the Kalighat *bustee* was sold, I had a hundred and fifty thousand rupees in cash and cheques in my pocket. . . And in Ratan Babu's house between evening and midnight, I blew out fifteen hundred rupees like pigeon's feathers in the air! H'm . . . Those

were days. Riding back at midnight I saw on Chitpur Road a poor little whore standing near a street-lamp and shivering, just shivering in the cold. Well, I looked and saw she wasn't the only one. There was a whole row of those poor creatures . . . Well, I could not sleep that night, and the next night, I drove up there again, this time with a hundred large woollen wraps—they cost you a pretty penny even in those days—and distributed them all. . . D'you know what happened next day? . . . H'm, all Calcutta buzzed with the story that some descendant of the Grand Moghuls of Delhi had come *in cognito* to town . . . Huh! a hundred rupees . . . what a trifle! . . . You better take God's name and clean up your mind! Huh! A hundred rupees! . . . what a shame! what an utter worthless lump of mud! Huh . . . ' .

Kanai stared out of the window, vacantly, at the *bustee* on the other side of the street. It was about mid-day, and everything seemed quiet. The menfolk had had their meal about nine and gone to work; the women also had finished all work and were resting for a while. . . In a few little huts, there were still signs of activity. There the men were out of work, and if you are going to have one square meal a day, you better have it as late as you can!

Geeta's father had spread himself out in the sun and was having a good nap. Something seemed to have happened, for on other days at about this time he would be seen in a *loongi*, smoking *biris* and coughing away. Geeta's mother also had obviously finished her dinner, for she was chewing *pan* and chatting with the fat old woman who was supposed to earn her living by helping to arrange marriages. Geeta was leaning quietly against the wooden

railing of their two-storied mud-hut. She looked really handsome; she had a new coloured *sari* on, and masses of deep black hair hung loosely behind her. Perhaps the old woman had brought them some scheme for her marriage. Geeta's mother took a few pairs of *saris* from the old woman and gave her back the others. Perhaps, then, Kanai thought, the bridegroom was a rich and generous young man. But the next moment he shuddered—maybe, it was some prosperous old man, several times married, who now wanted to bribe Geeta's poor parents in order to satisfy an old reprobate's insatiable lust!

Even that, maybe, was not so bad, Kanai went on thinking. At least in that case, Geeta would get enough to eat, her parents would feel their weight of penury at least slightly lifted. If Geeta could have at least some physical comfort, perhaps she could bear mental worries a lot better! . . . And when she has a child, perhaps that will bring her bliss. . . . But it mustn't, he thought, be a child who bears in his veins, like all in Kanai's family, so much tainted blood! No, it mustn't. Let Geeta's child be a pure, sweet creature. . . . Aren't healthy children born sometimes even in diseased families? Let Geeta have a sweet, little child who will grow into healthy, happy manhood! . . .

But what of himself, Kanai wondered morbidly. Did he know what road he should take? He had lost the certitude which he had felt earlier that morning when on his way home. . . . There was a sort of hunger in the broken bricks of Sukhamoy Chakravarti's tumble-down house, a sort of leering libido, and the sight of it had shaken whatever resolution he had mustered. The house had a worm in its staff, which nothing, nothing seemed able to kill.

## (VIII)

Evening in blacked-out Calcutta. It was early in the bright-phase of the moon, but the sickle orb had set already. The feast of lights in the great city once sent heavenwards a sort of blazing expedition, but all that had changed. Enemy planes might be scouring along the sky and lynxing for likely targets. All lights were shaded and screened so carefully that darkness seemed to have congealed and settled weirdly on streets and house-tops. The trams and buses cut noisily through the darkness, their shrunk headlights showing like the hollow eyes of a restless spectre. Inside the vehicles you could see the passengers but you could hardly distinguish them, all you could make out was a crowd of mysterious figures. Rickshaws were there in plenty, for petrol was scarce and human labour cheap. But you could see neither the contraptions nor the passengers in them. You could only see the paper-screened lights that moved like dim little points, and when the rickshaw came nearer, you could see the coolie's strange, straddling legs move up and down as he ran. On the pavements people walked with a curious, cautious hesitancy.

The shops on the roadside were lit up inside, but the lights were carefully shaded away from the street. Occasionally a high-powered light blazing away in a large department store would pierce the screen and throw a fugitive ray, like a burning charcoal, to the pavement outside. The dark figures moving stealthily on the streets would for a moment emerge at those points into a kind of half-light and sink into the gloom again. From time to time the trolly of a moving street car would come into sudden friction with the electric wire overhead, and a burst of bluish sparkle made the darkness more visible. The

distant buzz of aeroplanes could be heard, and perhaps one could see red-and-blue light points rushing like two little coloured comets from one end of the sky to another.

Kanai got off the tram. The whole of that afternoon he had spent in Curzon Park, and thought and thought of what Asoka's father had told him. Three thousand rupees a month! Perhaps in a few years it could be thirty thousand . . . if the war went on. Of course, the war would be going on. Could this war, raging from one extremity of the world to another, from the Atlantic to the Pacific . . . on land, by sea and in the air. . . could such a war come suddenly to a close? It wasn't like an earthquake, cyclone, or flood, the effusion of sudden natural disharmonies that spends itself in irresistible impetuosity and exhausts itself into quietude. . . War was a different proposition, a man-made affliction, carnage that has a purpose behind it and must go on till that purpose is gained or the parties exterminated. The artificial disharmonies that give rise to war seem to melt in the process of fighting and the myriad preparations for large-scale war, but the evil in man and his greed obtrudes itself and accentuates the disharmonies. And if war does stop after all, it would create even in the peace conditions for another war in the not too distant future. What doubts were there, in that case, about the prospect of three or thirty thousand a month? The next moment Kanai felt like laughing outright. What was three or thirty thousand worth to the desert of want that was his family? Could three or thirty thousand drops of water quench the thirst of an arid desert? Hadn't he been witness that morning to this desert thirst?

With a sigh, Kanai had resumed thoughts of his life's craving? Wasn't it his dream to qualify in science and carry on research and make some notable discovery? Such

thoughts would give his heart-strings a wrench. What did he care for the worship of Mammon? Hadn't he lived in the pathetic atmosphere of wealth accumulated only to get putrescent and vanish into thin air? Hadn't he seen, every day of his life, the ugly, covetous craving which had come over the descendants of Sukhamoy Chakravarti, like the sickening gluttony of toothless imbeciles? . . . No, he had no illusions about prosperity, . . . and of course he had, his ideals, his vision of life's sublimity, and he could only eschew the ways of money-making.

Inside of himself waged a contest of emotions. Kanai had stayed at home all the morning and failed to worry a way out. When it was afternoon, he went out and stood for a while near the Asutosh statue. The office where Neela worked was nearby, and he had hoped to meet her when she left off work and ask her advice. But Neela came out with a number of companions, and Kanai, with a sort of queer touchiness, did not like to call her away from the group. Wasn't she laughing at some witticism, wasn't she happy in that little band of young men and women who were strangers to Kanai? Why, then, should he disturb her, he thought, with a tinge of injured vanity, why should he imagine that she had any time to give him and his problems? He hid himself in the crowd on the street, took good care to avoid Neela's gaze, and sat mooning on a bench in Curzon Park.

It was from there that he was now returning.

He got off the tram near the top of a narrow lane. It was pretty nearly pitch-dark there, the hooded gas-lamps emitting a dead caricature of light. The night was cold and the doors and windows on either side were shut tight. There were a very few pedestrians, but as Kanai entered the lane, he was startled by the sudden roar of a motor-car

which put on its shaded lights and began to move. He was rather surprised, for the car must have been waiting at that unlikely spot, and he was surprised even more when he noticed the number of the car—it was the same as that of one of the cars belonging to his pupil Asoka's family. It looked the same too. What brought the car there, he wondered, when he was startled again to see someone moving towards him. 'Who's it?' he asked.

A young man of seventeen or eighteen now stood beside him, and Kanai said, 'Oh, it's you, Nepi! What's up?'

'Kano-da, you've got to come to our meeting to-morrow—the people's welfare committee's meeting. You see, many of us workers have certain complaints about the way the work is going on, and you have to be our spokesman.'

A smile broke into Kanai's face—a smile not of banter, but of affection. He really liked the boy, Neela's work-mad brother, ever absorbed in dreams of the world's freedom, busy day and night, distributing pamphlets, pasting posters on walls, chalking slogans, organising hunger-marches, shouting wholeheartedly the demand of food for the people and freedom to make sure of it, venting his heart's desire, 'Long live Revolution'.

'You've got to come, Kano-da', Nepi insisted.

'Yes, I will', said Kanai, 'But have you eaten yet?' He suddenly remembered what Neela had told him about Nepi's queer daily round.

'No', Nepi answered, 'I will be back home presently'. Kanai could not see his face, but guessed from the tones of his voice that Nepi must have smiled when he gave that answer. 'You wait', he said, and hurried into the house. Sukhamoy Chakravarti's mansion, of course, was dark as ever. Electricity bills had accumulated so long that the

company had cancelled the connection. There was a lantern inside their room, but the stairs, the court-yard and verandah were completely dark. With practised steps, Kanai hurried through the darkness towards his mother's room. There must be some food in the house, he thought, for he had brought some money that morning—at any rate, his own food must be there and he could give it to Nepi. He gave a light push and opened the door, but was absolutely startled and stood stiff on the doorstep.

It was a proper sight. His father sat with a bottle of wine. His mother was carefully arranging some food—obviously it was some meat preparation which went well with the drinks. She looked at Kanai, rather, it seemed, ashamed of herself. His father raised his reddening eyes and said, 'D'you know, your mother has given me ten rupees—yes, ten rupees. And this bottle has cost eight and twelve—it's country-made whisky, the pity of it, and yet it's that price. What a horrid war this is, damn it! And I have bought some mutton—real, first class mutton. I say', he told his wife, 'why not give Kanoo a bite of the meat, it's good, real good!'

For a moment Kanai stood inert. And then of a sudden he saw a sort of lightning flash before his eyes! So—that was the rotting mansion of the Chakravartis, yes, rotting, brick by brick! And the next moment he turned his back on the room, shut the door quietly, and left. It was strange, he thought—his mother bounteously providing meat and drink to her drunkard husband, like *Annapurna* before *Siva*! . . . Couldn't there be a mighty earthquake that moment and Sukhamoy's dilapidated mansion with all his cursed descendants populating it find an instantaneous grave? In that case, thought Kanai, he would full-throatedly acknowledge a great good God and shout hallelujahs to



Him as he would go to his doom! . . . But, where, anyhow, had Nepi run away to?

Nepi wasn't to be seen. He was a strange boy, possibly he had suddenly thought of some work left undone, for otherwise he wouldn't have gone off in that manner. . . But—was it him coming back again? Kanai noticed a white robe in the darkness, went up and called—'Nepi'.

'No, it's us', said the voice of an elderly woman, and simultaneously someone in the darkness burst into heavy sobs.

'Who is it?' Kanai asked in surprise, for he knew everybody in the neighbourhood. Whoever was sobbing could now be heard to be more distraught than before. The elderly woman put in, 'She's only stumbled in the darkness—now then, come along, dear'.

Vainly trying to suppress her sobs, the weeping girl said, 'No, I won't'.

Kanai could now recognise the voice and called in accentuated astonishment, 'It's you, Geeta?'

'Then you go home on your own, child—I'm off', said the elderly woman and walked away as fast as she could. Geeta could contain herself no more and sobbing disconsolately, dropped down to the ground.

'What on earth is the matter, Geeta? Please get up,' Kanai pleaded. 'Could'nt you possibly tell me?' he added, when all that Geeta could do was to weep in sheer helplessness.

After a time she found strength to whisper, 'Could you get me some poison, Kanoo-da?'

Kanai shuddered. Perhaps even the old man lusting for marriage had disapproved of her looks and rejected her! He hung his head down and stood without a word.

Geeta spoke again, 'How am I to show my face to everybody, Kanoo-da?'

'Now then, you come along and tell me what's happened', Kanai affectionately pulled her up.

She tried to speak—'That woman there took me——' and she could say no more.

With an effort Geeta told her story, and Kanai felt like turning to stone. The woman had taken her somewhere, ostensibly to enable a wealthy young man looking for a bride to have a look at her and decide if he could approve of her as his wife-to-be. She had said that the man had liked Geeta's photograph and had sent Geeta's parents some clothes as a token of respect and a request that he might be allowed to have a look at her. He could not, it was reported, go to the *bustee* to see Geeta; he was far too respectable, and that was the alleged reason for the arrangement. What happened, however, was that the old woman took Geeta to her own house where she ran a secret trade and there she had forcibly sold Geeta's body as a kind of commodity. . .

'How can I live any longer?' Geeta cried in agony.

Kanai was wrapt in thought. 'It's a shame', he said after a while, 'but didn't your mother——'

'Oh, she must have known all about it', she interjected. 'What?'

'Yes, she must have known, or she couldn't have told me when I went out with that woman that I must do what she wanted me to . . . "you can get us some food to eat and clothes to hide our shame," mother said . . . Oh, she must have known!' Geeta sobbed aloud.

A strange apparition seemed to float before Kanai's eyes. It was the image of this beautiful world, but an image

disfigured by unsightly sores. Had Sukhamoy Chakravarti's tainted blood seeped on to all the world? Were the broken bricks of Sukhamoy's mansion scattered on all the avenues of life?

'What *can* I do, Kanoo-da?' Geeta was sobbing.

Suddenly Kanai gripped Geeta's hand, so hard that she almost cried. 'Could you trust me and come along with me?' he asked.

Geeta was taken aback and stared mutely at his face.

Kanai raised an arm in the direction of the darkness and said, 'You come with me—if you can trust me.'

'To your home?' asked Geeta.

'No. I have broken off with the family altogether.'

### (IX)

The charge of cowardice levelled at the Bengali is not entirely unfounded. He has imagination; but he lacks practical knowledge and is afraid of uncertainties. This accusation is true especially of the people of western Bengal. There are, of course, many sophisticated explanations of this phenomenon. Bengal's fertile fields produce ever so easily such bounteous crops and her self-sufficient villages have such a closed social system that one's native vigour gets rusted and turns gradually to sleep. The desire for adventure, for treks and voyages to unknown regions in search of fresh booties to be fought for and seized, slumbers deeply in the heart of the Bengali and can only be whipped up with an effort.

Kanai had often tried to rouse in his life this abandon of adventure. But for three generations the spirit had been lulled to inanity, and the slumber had turned from a com-

fort into a taint. How often had he resolved to leave that house of weird memories and sights and to found a line of his own, his blood cleansed of all impurities and the spring of new, strong life! And then he would work—work with vigour abounding, with real abandon! But he could never get over the hurdles. And every time, strangely enough, the first hurdle was his mother's love, his sense of kinship with the family where he felt his birth itself was a curse! It was a mystery to him how together in his heart there dwelt two contrary emotions—love and hate. And the two contrary emotions had tugged at one another and left him inert. So he dreamt dreams, but could never see their fruition.

That day, however, his hate for the family knew no bounds—hadn't he seen the ugly greed of everyone in the house, greed baring its venom-tooth at the sight of a mere one hundred rupees? Hadn't he seen his own dear mother serving out meat and drink to his wreck of a father and gloating in perverted self-abnegation? His mother could not stand his keeping a few extra rupees and yet had no compunction in wasting ten rupees on liquor for her precious husband! And then he had seen what Geeta had had done to her, and he felt nothing but a relentless hatred for the way of the world. Emotions long pent-up had, as it were, burst their bonds, and in a moment Kanai who was listless and inhibited felt as if he knew full well the path he should tread. It was as if a sudden earthquake had caused cracks and fissures in a stone-wall prison, and the prisoner inured to the gloom of his cell and left alone with vain imaginings now saw the way to light and to freedom. The world that spread out in front of him was in no wise less frightening or complicated than the house of the Chakravartis. Kanai knew it, and yet he felt no qualms,

no fear ; he took Geeta's arm and swam into the uncertain tides of life in the pitch-dark city.

When they had gone a little way, Geeta asked timidly, 'Where do you think we should go now, Kanoo-da?'

Kanai could see she was in a state of nerves. He wanted to reassure her and said in a tone of genuine affection, 'This is a great city, dear sister, and millions live here. Couldn't we find room for two for the night? Of course we shall. Now, let's not worry too much.'

Geeta asked no further questions, but she could not be reassured so easily. She had seen little of life, but what little she had seen told her that it was no easy job to get generous people to open their doors to two perfect strangers—a young man and a girl. She knew that in their *bustee* there was trouble if one stood at a window overlooking another man's yard, and hell would be let loose even if a patient in a room lay sick and groaning. There was a big house near where they lived, with garden attached. But one had to steal into the garden unnoticed in order to pluck a few flowers for the daily worship. On the far side of the *bustee* was a large six-storeyed house, with two tube-wells fitted with electric pumps, and yet when Geeta went there to get some water for her dyspeptic father, they sent dogs to chase her out of the place!

When they reached an important crossing, Kanai hailed a taxi. It was not long before they reached a house in a dark, narrow lane. Kanai got off, knocked at the door and shouted, 'Bejoy-da! Bejoy-da!'

'What about my fare?' the taxi man called out. 'Yes, one moment', Kanai said and shouted again for Bejoy-da.

A servant opened the door and Kanai asked him, 'I say, Shashthi, where's Bejoy-da?' 'He isn't back yet,' he replied, and Kanai spoke again, 'Oh, hasn't he, yet? But

look, Shashthi, have you got some money on you?' The servant, taken aback, said, 'Nò, Sir, I haven't any money on me.'

'When do I get *my* money?' the taxi man shouted.

Suddenly Geeta took a five-rupee note out of the hemmed-in end of her sari, and gave it to the man. 'I have no change on me Ma'am', he said, and Geeta answered quickly, 'That'll be alright'.

In a moment the taxi moved out and as Kanai looked on in surprise, Geeta began, 'I had a five-rupee note,' and could say no more. Her voice was choked by sobs which welled out at the thought of what she had been driven to for earning that note.

Kanai understood perfectly, and gave her a quiet pat. 'Let's go in', he said presently.

Bejoy—Kanai's Bejoy-da—worked on the editorial board of a daily newspaper. He was a distinguished figure in Bengal's journalism. He had a style of his own, which could be easily demarcated from the frothy sentimentality which marred much of the usual editorial ebullitions. There was yet another strand in his life. He was one of those Bengalis who from early youth are possessed by a passion to serve the Motherland—one of those on whose shoulders settle permanently thoughts of Indian freedom like the old man in the tales of Sindbad the Sailor. Entering College in 1916, he had come in contact with the terrorists of those days. Then in 1921, he had laid aside his postgraduate studies and plunged into the non-co-operation movement. Emerging from jail, he worked with redoubled enthusiasm in the cause of revolution. He was a detenu when from his detention he appeared at the M.A. examination and got his degree. After release, he was for some time lecturer in a

college. And then came 1930—the great days of the mass upsurge, and again Government arrested and detained him. Released after seven years of incarceration, he had taken on this journalistic job. He was now a Communist.

Bejoy was a bachelor, and his servant Shashthi looked after everything in the house. He depended on his worthy servitor with complete unconcern; only occasionally he would wake up and notice how he was being roundly cheated every time Shashthi made a purchase in the market. He would put down in a day-book the cost of fish even when he served out only vegetarian dishes, and would say without a tremor that the fish he had bought was rotten; Shashthi was clever enough also to anticipate further questions and would add at once that flies were buzzing so near the poor rotting fish that he had thrown it away! His master would smile at the servant's presence of mind and give him some extra money to make sure the fish was actually bought.

Bejoy returned that evening at about ten. He was an amazing sort of person, for he showed no surprise when he saw a young girl with Kanai. 'Hello, how are you?' was all he said.

Kanai beckoned to Geeta and she bowed low at Bejoy's feet. 'That's all right, my dear!' said Bejoy-da. 'Let's all sit down and have a chat.'

When he had finished his story, Kanai asked, 'Now, tell me, Bejoy-da, what should I do?'

Geeta had gone to the room next door to have some rest. Bejoy called Shashthi and asked him, 'I say, how much would they charge for hot *puris*, Shashthi?'

Shashthi started scratching his head. Bejoy went on, 'Well, you pay four annas per *seer* on top of whatever

price they charge and get them to fry half a *seer*, quick. And bring some sweets, too.' He gave the servant a rupee.

'I'm hungry and would like very much to eat', said Kanai, 'but I don't think the poor girl will be in the mood for food'.

Bejoy smiled sadly. 'What d'you advise me to do now?' asked Kanai.

'There's one very easy way out, but it's for you to take it.'

'What is it, Bejoy-da?', Kanai asked eagerly.

'Well, why not marry the girl and settle down?'

Kanai stared at Bejoy, flabbergasted. Bejoy had lit a cigarette and was leaning back unconcernedly on a cushion.

After a few moments, Kanai replied, 'No, Bejoy-da, you don't understand, but that isn't possible. Suggest something else, if you can'.

'I don't know—it's not so easy, in that case.'

In a surge of emotion Kanai gave Bejoy the story of his family and said in a chagrined voice, 'I can't marry and settle down, Bejoy-da, with all this tainted blood running in my veins.'

'Look here', said Bejoy, 'if you suspect something, you can have your blood tested, and then arrange whatever treatment might be necessary . . . Don't worry about expenses. I'll see to that, if you don't mind.'

Kanai was silent for a while, and then said, 'No, Bejoy-da, that can't be.'

'In that case, Kanoo, why did you bring her along with you?'

'You—you ask me this question?' Kanai burst out, 'How could I stand all that cruelty and injustice which this girl was being made to undergo—'.

Bejoy waved his hand to cut him short. 'But don't you know, my dear boy, that this is exactly what's been happen-



ing from age to age? Haven't women been the property of men, fathers lording it, when they are children, husbands when they are young, and sons when they get old? And when there's famine and social convulsion, fathers and husbands sell their daughters and wives, Bejoy smiled wanly and went on: 'And while social convulsions are rare, isn't famine a chronic condition of our world? Aren't the poor ever in the grip of famine—in this world divided between the rich and the poor? So this trade in human flesh goes on—in Calcutta it is one of the oldest trades . . . and not alone in Calcutta, . . . you look up police reports from every country and you will see what it is like . . . There are hundreds of girls like the one there being dragged to—.'

Kanai stopped him. 'But have you once looked at Geeta's face properly, Bejoy-da?'

'Perhaps not, Kanoo, but I can guess what her agony is like . . . But maybe, she'd have got used to it in time.'

Excited, Kanai got on to his feet. Bejoy sensed his emotion and pulled him down.

'I didn't know, Bejoy-da, that you were so—so callous', Kanai said in quiet, hard tones.

Bejoy ignored the thrust and said, 'Has the girl some education?'

Kanai frowned. 'Let that be. You don't need to worry.'

'What madness! You just answer my question, Kanoo.'

'Oh—she's read up to the seventh standard. She used to be my sister's classmate, but when her father lost his job last year or so, she had to give up.'

'Well then—in that case, why not send her to one of these Women's Welfare centres?'

'Welfare centre?' Kanai asked in some astonishment.

'Yes, or if you like, I can place her in the charge of

Christian missionaries. One of them is a friend of mine—a very good man indeed. And if you like, I can ask him.'

'Don't worry, Bejoy-da', Kanai rejoined, 'It's so terribly kind of you to put us up for the night. Why take on further superfluous worries?'

Kanai felt quite bitter. He had suddenly remembered what his pupil Asoka's father had told him. Didn't he promise to set him up in business? If you sell fifty *maunds* of rice every day, you make a clear profit of a hundred rupees—three thousand a month, that is to say, thirtysix thousand a year! Wasn't that the reckoning? Well, he would then get Geeta admitted into a boarding school, and she would be educated and learn to rely on herself. That was, he thought, the way out.

Shashthi had fetched the *puris* and sweets by this time and was asking them to hurry.

Bejoy-da got two beds made on the verandah. There was only one proper bedroom. The other room was kitchen and pantry combined, and Shashthi slept there . . . Kanai called Geeta who was so long lying on a mat in the kitchen and crying her heart out. When Kanai called her, she got up obediently and even took some food ; only she cried all the more as she ate. Kanai was going to console her with kind words, but Bejoy signalled to him to desist. After a while Bejoy himself called the girl.

Geeta came up and stood silently before him. 'You sleep in that room, Geeta,' he said in a tone of quiet authority, and the girl complied.

It was very cold on the verandah—as cold as it could be in Calcutta. But Bejoy slept like a top, snored contentedly. Kanai kept awake, worrying over the events of the day. He regretted nothing, only he was having a kind of stock-taking, and planning for the future.

The buzz of a distant aeroplane could be heard. Another flew past—another, yet another . . . The night sky of Calcutta resounded to their roar. Perhaps it was a detachment of bombers set out on their nightly expedition. Or perhaps they were fighter planes off to scour the frontier in search of the enemy's machines . . . A little further to the west from Bejoy's flat was the river—the gleaming, silver Ganges. Along the river, the Port Commissioners' railway was busy, goods were being moved in unending trains, the noise of shunting could be distinctly heard. Now and again one would hear the whistle of an engine . . . Was it the noise of shunting heard from further away, the big railway-yard? Not far from there was a munitions factory, and perhaps at that hour were arriving stacks of raw material, and simultaneously were being transported the finished products, the weapons of death . . . Machines numberless were working, and along with them, men working night shifts at double wages . . . Quite nearby, was the local A.R.P. headquarters, doors and windows bolted and barred, but a streak of light had filtered through chinks somewhere and formed a brazen straight line . . . Somebody inside there had begun to sing! Perhaps he was on duty, the electric buzzer expectant before him, and in some strange psycho-analytic aberration had burst into unaccustomed singing . . .

Bejoy snored away, deep in unworried slumber. Kanai gave a sigh. He resented what his Bejoy-da had said about Geeta and her predicament. But he had made up his mind—he would set up in business, listen to the advice of Asoka's father and accept his help.

(X)

He got up early next morning and went to Asoka's place. He reached there earlier than usual. The urge to

start on a new and active life goaded him into impatience, and he only realised how early it was when he reached his pupil's residence. He could see from outside the gate that the balconies were being washed and scrubbed. Even the municipal scavengers had not finished their work on the streets. The time scheduled for Kanai's arrival was half-past seven, when the radio programme starts as the signal for the day's work. But when Kanai reached his place of work, the radio was silent. A little shame-facedly, he went back to the Bowbazar-College Street Crossing. Trams were hurrying towards Esplanade. Had the pile of disarranged files at Neela's office, he reflected, been cleared up already? He crossed over from the pavement on the eastern side of the road, and almost immediately a tram came up and halted for a moment. No, Neela wasn't there . . . Another tram came soon afterwards, but it was bound for Dalhousie Square . . . Yes, here was another for Esplanade, more crowded than the last, but Neela wasn't there . . . He looked and saw there were other trams coming in the distance; the front one must be for Dalhousie Square, and the one behind for Esplanade. . . .

'Good morning', he was startled to hear a metallic voice. 'This is All-India Radio and here is the news in Bengali. . .'

So it was past seven-thirty, but still he stood there, waiting. It wouldn't take that Esplanade car more than a few minutes to reach the crossing. Only a few minutes . . .

'Here is the news'. The radio blared on. 'A joint communiqué was issued yesterday, December 16, by Allied Military Headquarters, to the effect that the day before yesterday, that is, on December 15, enemy planes had again raided the Chittagong area. The Japs came twice, in the morning and again after nightfall. They dropped a few bombs and were chased away by our fighter planes. The

amount of damage has not yet been ascertained, but it is clear that both damage and casualties are slight. Most of the bombs failed to hit their targets. On the same day Japanese planes also raided Feni, where the damage inflicted has been negligible."

Every time Kanai heard the announcer's voice he felt that the fellow had missed his vocation ; he should have been a feudatory prince or a theatrical actor, he spoke in a voice of such majestic gravity as is reserved perhaps for the recital of a wonderful charter or a modern rendering of how emperor Alamgir used to give his orders!

"Our airforce", the announcer went on, "continued its raid on targets in Burma last night. Direct hits were observed, a munitions train was set on fire and the whole area was lit up by the explosion. All our planes returned safely to their bases."

The Esplanade car had come up by this time. Yes, there was Neela, on the far side of the tram, looking the other way. Kanai stood eagerly, waiting for her to turn her eyes towards where he was. But she did not know he was there and continued to look out the other side. The tram moved on, and for a moment Kanai was caught in two minds. He wanted to jump on to the car, but he checked himself. In a moment he turned towards Asoka's residence.

When he reached Asoka's place, everybody there was discussing the air raid on Chittagong and Feni. The head of the family looked grave: 'Chittagong has had three raids in December', he said, 'on the 5th, 10th and 15th—a gap of exactly five days every time.'

It was as if a conference was in session. The old man sat in the centre, and around him were his two elder sons and a few trusted old employees. Asoka was also there, but

he had come out to meet his tutor and now dragged him to the discussion. 'Take your seat, *Master Mashai*,' Asoka's father said, continuing to look grave. 'I've listened in to Saigon and Tokyo, and I expect the Japs are now going to start a real big-scale air attack.'

Amal, the eldest of his sons, put in, 'Our head offices have been transferred already, and all the more important documents are there in safe custody. But it isn't so easy to move the mountains of stuff in our godowns!'

The second son Asim now spoke: 'All that must be insured. What then is the good of carting them about?'

'There'll be a lot of good,' the old man retorted, 'Now, listen carefully. You try and see if you can rent godowns near the suburbs. We've already set up a godown near the factory attached to our garden-house, haven't we? Well, you build two more godowns as quick as you can. And you,' the old man told the second son, 'you take your wife and children to Benares where they'll stay. Asoka also will be going up there. Why don't you accompany Asoka, *Master Mashai*? You'll get a hundred rupees every month, all found.'

Kanai looked at him in surprise, then said, 'I'm afraid that won't be very convenient for me. Besides—you told me yesterday about my setting up in business—the rice trade—'

'Oh yes, yes, I'd forgotten altogether. I say, Amal, you take on Kanai Babu as one of our agents. He'll get commission on sales and purchases. You'll have to set him up, so to say, you know. Make a man of him. He belongs to a wonderful family, it'd do him good to be in business. And if he wants goods on credit, well, you enquire about the party and let him have what he might want.'

Amal smiled and said, 'As you say, dad.' Then turning

towards Kanai, he added, 'Why not start work today? Let's go now, if you're ready. You'll be having your meal with me at the office, what?'

For a moment Kanai hesitated, he did not fancy having his midday meal at Amal's office. But the matter of a meal, he reflected, was not of such importance, especially when he had already persuaded himself to ask a favour. So, shaking off his doubts, he said he was ready to go.

'You please wait a little while, I shan't be long', said Amal. 'Meanwhile, Asoka, you talk to your teacher.'

Asoka was the happiest of all at this arrangement. Good cheer shone in the bright eyes of the lively lad. 'So you'll be in business, sir?' he said.

Kanai smiled, 'Let's see what comes of it'.

'Oh, I know it'll come off wonderful, sir', Asoka said, 'I tell you, in a year's time you'll be getting a car of your own, or you wouldn't be able to cope with your work'.

'Go on', Kanai lightly rejoined.

'Yes, I know what I'm talking about. I'll remind you when it all happens'.

The sincere good wishes of the young lad made Kanai feel extremely delighted. Asoka was really very fond of him.

'But you know, sir, it'll be my loss', Asoka spoke again.

'What makes you say so, Asoka?'

'Another tutor will be coming along. He can't be a patch on you, I'm sure.'

'Perhaps someone much abler will be coaching you', Kanai said.

'No', repeated Asoka and shook his head.

'In that case', smiled Kanai, 'I shall be coming over to coach you even when I'm in business'.

'You don't know, sir, how changed you will be', Asoka laughed, 'and you'll never have the time. D'you know what

father was saying the other day? Now's the time, he said, for minting money in the War market, so long it has just been the preface to everything . . . and especially, he said, business in rice, wheat, sugar and other foodstuff was going to soar. Father laughed and said that if the key to our godowns were misplaced for a week, there'll be no kitchen fires burning in Bengal on the eighth day!

'But how could that be?', Kanai asked.

'Ugh!' Asoka replied, 'you can't imagine how much rice father has stacked in his godown, you can't imagine!'

Kanai had not been too bad a student of economics, but he was astounded to see this young lad's intuitive sense of practical economics.

'*Master Mashai!*' Amal was calling Kanai and when the latter came out of the room, said, 'Thrice I called you, I said, "Mr. Chakravarti!", but you didn't listen. I'll be calling you "Mr. Chakravarti" in business circles. You see, *Master Mashai* is a designation people wouldn't appreciate!'

Often before had Kanai seen the enormous structures of steel, brick, wood and concrete which lined Dalhousie Square and its neighbourhood. They were sky-scraping five, six, seven-storeyed buildings, firm and hard, obvious witnesses to treasure untold hidden behind their walls. But never had they fascinated Kanai's mind and soul, he never saw any grace in their insolent heftiness, no cheery friendliness. Now when he entered a five-storeyed mansion, he felt a sort of nervous tingling in his veins. And the tingling seemed to be accentuated by a nasal noise—the sound of the lift coming down to stop dead in front of them. The liftman opened the door and gave Amal a salute.

In the office, Amal looked into the correspondence, jotted down some remarks, and turned towards Kanai. 'I've



got to go to several important offices. You come along with me and get to know the ropes.'

Amal was appearing to-day in what was to Kanai a strange role. He had often talked to him before in the house, and whenever the topic related to literature or the arts Amal had shown such ignorance, bordering sometimes on stupidity, that Kanai had laughed in his sleeve. He had looked for a simile, and described Amal as an ass with a golden hoof. But to-day he marvelled at what he saw of Amal. He saw his strength, his self-confidence, his unruffled daring. He was happy to notice his cool air of complete equality when he talked to the big bosses of the long-established European firms. And he was astounded at his introduction to what went on behind the closed doors of the forbidding mansions of steel and concrete. He saw the play for high stakes going on all the time, the gamble between *Lakshmi* the goddess of plenty, and *Kuver*, the quasi-divine guardian angel of accumulation. In the gamble, *Lakshmi* was losing all the time, and was being compelled to meet her losses by opening the doors of her plenty to the agents of avarice. Wherever her domain extended—the world's rich cornfields, the peasant's granary, inaccessible forests, hills and regions fertilised by life-giving rivers, the burning underground storehouse of mineral treasure—all her domain was drained to bring grist to the insatiable mill of *Kuver*. Hundreds of thousands of people ran every day of their lives to the business area, by train, tram, bus, and on foot, worked from morn till night, their faces pale and bodies bent and emaciated, worked till they were ready to drop,—all this happened because there must be people to keep note of what went on in that amazing gamble where greed ever wins.

Returning when his outdoor work was done, Amal went over the different departments of the office. Here he was

lynx-eyed, no slackness in work could evade his scrutiny. He asked for certain files and sent notes to departmental chiefs on lapses in office management.

After lunch, Amal asked him to accompany him to the garden house. Kanai was feeling rather restive, for he had learnt nothing about his own work so far. Amal guessed his state of mind and said with a smile, 'You are being initiated into your work too, this way, Kanai Babu. You've got to know first of all the ground you stand on.'

'Of course, you are right', Kanai replied, rather shame-facedly.

In the car, Amal lit a cigarette. 'You don't smoke?', he asked, 'You should, you know, at least to keep us company.' After a while he said, 'you know I've come to like you very much, Kanai Babu. . . I've been on the look-out for an assistant—not an assistant really, but a partner, a friend. You see I have another business; it's completely separate, and nobody at home—not even father—knows about it . . . I want a good and trusty friend and shall make him my partner.'

Kanai felt quite touched. 'I'm sure I shan't ever betray your confidence, but it isn't easy to be a real friend, is it?'

Amal was at the steering wheel. He looked straight ahead of him and said, 'I like you very much and that is all there is to it. I don't care for sycophants. I want to be your friend and I wish you try to be mine'.

'With all my heart', laughed Kanai.

'Well, in that case, you must share my vice', said Amal and held his cigarette case open before him. 'I have another good friend', he added; 'you will see him at the factory, for he's the manager'.

They were driving up to a suburban area some fifteen miles from Calcutta. The car left the main road and took a

turning. Even<sup>†</sup> there military lorries were rushing ahead. From time to time could be seen military encampments in what used to be garden areas. New structures were being put up here and there. In several places *bustees* were being cleared for fresh encampments. Huge military lorries stood in rows alongside the road. A few village folk were the only pedestrians. Through the sumptuous vegetation could be seen occasionally some bamboo-and-mud huts. There were small ponds along the roadside; the fields displayed a bountiful winter crop; white and blue flowers clung to uncared-for creepers; wheat, barley and mustard stood out in deep-dyed green. The car was moving pretty fast in that unfrequented road, but suddenly the brakes had to be put on, for a little crowd had emerged in front—a crowd of men and women, all their worldly belongings carried on their head or their arms, some carrying on their shoulders a pole from which two loads hung balanced, the children shepherding a few cows and goats. Amal saw them and stopped the car. He called an old man and asked, 'Have you been thrown out of your village? And are the military setting up a camp there?'

The old man kept looking at Amal and could not say a word. His lips trembled, and tears trickled out of his shrunken eyes. The whole group also had halted and the girls in surprise scrutinised the two strangers. One of them had quite comely features and especially drew their attention.

'Have you all got compensation money?' Amal asked again.

It was an old woman now who answered. 'Yes, child, we have got compensation. But what is all that worth to us? We don't know which way to turn. It's the village where our people have lived for generations.' She began to weep, and another voice completed her tale of woes. 'We

had to leave our homes, our ponds—everything. Don't they say that your own village and your own mother aren't different?' Tears began to pour again and there was nobody in the crowd whose eyes were dry. Even Kanai could feel a lump in his throat.

Now Amal spoke again, 'You see there's nothing to be done about it. There's a war on and people must suffer. The soldiers must live somewhere—accommodation must be found. Big houses also have been taken over.'

An old man laughed and retorted. 'The owners of big houses have so many that they can spare some. What about us? Where on earth do we go?'

'Oh, I can get you accommodation if you want it; you know—pur, don't you?'

'—pur? oh yes, we know the place all right.'

'Well, then, you go up to Rai Bahadur Bibhuti Babu's garden. I'm going there too. You'll find accommodation there—tin-sheds for the time being, and then you can build your huts. We are having some houses built there, and you work and earn your living.'

They all looked at one another's face. 'What do you decide?' Amal asked. 'Let's think it over', they said.

Amal took out a five-rupee note, gave it to the old man and said, 'Here you are, my good man. Get some sweets for the children with this money . . . and well, if you like the idea, come over to —pur, you'll find accommodation there.'

'What unfortunate people!' Amal said as he started the car.

There were tears in Kanai's eyes. He kept silent, and Amal added, 'That good-looking girl was quite a misfit in that crowd.'

It was an enormous garden. Sometime in the past a very rich man must have put up there his palace of luxury. What a queer society is ours! From time immemorial men have heard preached the ideals of restraint and renunciation, the philosophy of *Maya* (Illusion), and yet the number of *Vashisthas* and *Buddhas* is infinitesimal, the proportion of saints and sages to the total population must be one to many millions. Indeed, in the work-a-day world men pine and fight for winning *Indra's* laurels, the prize-post of the King of the gods. In no wise has man's hankering for *Indra's* glories diminished. And among the many splendours and enviable prerogatives of the King of the gods is possession of a beautiful garden—the garden of paradise, where lovely *Apsaries* dance to ecstatic tunes and plentiful supplies of the *Soma* beverage never fail. So whoever piles up treasure on earth seeks a tithe of *Indra's* splendour by acquiring for himself a garden of eden. One of these miniature *Indras* must have owned this garden which came into the hands of the Rai Bahadur whose craft in commerce was the modern variant of ancient ritual sacrifices.

Right in the centre of the garden was a large pond, and reflected in its waters was the house, pretty as a picture. Perhaps a drastic chemical analysis could have ferreted congealed wine-drops and the dust of the feet of dancing beauties out of cracks in the marble flooring. But things had changed. The house was kept intact, and while *Indra* was propitiated, *Viswakarma*, the god of work, had also his portion, for the grounds were now used as a factory.

Five or six large tin-sheds could be seen as soon as one entered the garden.

The factory manager ran up as Amal's car turned the corner of the gate. A well set-up man, there was a sort of deep punch-mark on his forehead, and in his manner was

an exaggeration of submissive deference. He ran up to open the car-door and smiled respectfully, 'Good morning, sir.'

Amal shook his hand and said, 'Good morning, how are you, Jitoo-da?'

'It's so kind of you to be coming along.'

'How's work?'

'I'm doing my best. There is a shortage of hands. I had to take up the hammer to-day.'

'You give us a good feed', Amal smiled, 'I've arranged for more workmen for you—at least some. They will be here permanently and will have to have their quarters. About ten men, twelve women and several children. Some of the children might be given work also.'

The manager was enthusiastic when Amal told the story of the evacuees. 'I felt so sorry for the poor folk,' Amal went on. 'They were utterly helpless. I thought we could help them as well as ourselves this way.' 'Yes', Jitoo answered, 'You have a heart of gold, Heaven will prosper your schemes.'

Amal looked at his watch and said, 'Let's go and see the rice godown. You are looking after it well, aren't you? The stuff mustn't go bad.'

'Oh yes, sir, I inspect it carefully every day. You had better come and have a look.'

The godown was an enormous tin shed enclosed by high brick walls. Kanai was astounded when the heavy door was unlocked, and he saw row on row of bags of rice piled thick and high from one end of the shed to another.

Amal threw a quick, sharp glance all over the pile. Kanai could see that all trace of Amal's friendship for Jitoo had vanished altogether from the expression of his face. 'It's all right', Amal said as he came out and lit a cigarette.

A few paces ahead, he asked, 'There's two thousand five hundred bags there, isn't it?' 'Yes, sir', Jitoo answered.

Three out of the five other tin-sheds had been converted into iron works. Lathes were busy, nuts and bolts were being turned out, military contracts had to be supplied in double-quick time.

The two other sheds were in the process of construction, and brickwalls were being built around them.

'These two will also hold 2500 bags each, won't they?' Amal asked.

'More than that,' Jitoo answered. 'These are longer by fifteen feet.'

'You're a wonderful man, Jitoo-da', Amal smiled, the cordiality returning to his eyes.

'My heart is in this work', said Jitoo, 'It belongs to you, but I love it, and your father—well, I respect him as if he was a god.'

'Anyhow, you give the god's son some tea now', Amal returned. 'And I say—I had forgotten so long to introduce you, I'm so sorry.' He turned towards Kanai and introduced him. Kanai raised his palm in salutation, but Jitoo had put his hands forward and they shook hands.

'We are friends, you know, Jitoo-da', Amal said again.

He was a strange man, was Amal. He was at his job all the day, and always smiling. Kanai never knew his sort before.

Back to his city office, Amal went out again, this time to the headquarters of the Government's Supply Department. This time also he dragged Kanai along with him. The place was crowded with people—orderlies in military dress moving about with files. Kanai noticed particularly a dwarf dressed up in orderly's clothes. He gave Amal a smart salute, and it seemed that Amal gave him something

and he saluted again. 'You please wait here a little while', Amal told Kanai, and the dwarf got a chair for him.

Kanai continued to think of the dwarf and the work he was given. He recalled mythological stories—the building of a bridge across the straits to ancient Ceylon, where even squirrels helped. What a war was being waged now, he thought! There were men and machines, horses and mules and camels and elephants and bulls and pigeons, all requisitioned for total war effort! Even the labours of that dwarf were so important to-day. . . Kanai sighed as he reflected what wonders could be wrought if four hundred millions were properly mobilised, their hearts really and truly in the job! . . .

'Mr. Chakravarti!' Amal was calling Kanai and took him inside the room. He introduced Kanai to a European officer in military dress and added, 'He'll come and see you if I'm held up somewhere else'. The officer shook hands, 'I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Chakravarti.'

Getting into the car, Amal drew out a gold watch and said, 'D'you know what I did? I bought this watch off that European. Guess how much it cost. . . A thousand rupees!'

Kanai could not quite fathom out the way of things in this strange company.

Amal laughed and spoke again, 'You have brought me luck. I've bagged a big contract to-day.'

Towards the closing hour of the day's work, Amal asked him to go to the other room and tackle some black-smiths. 'You see', Amal said, 'they have come for orders for knives we need for jungle clearing. We shall get them the iron and the wooden handles, they'll just make us the finished commodity. We can pay them up to one-and-eight.



per knife. You try and see at what rates you can settle with them, Kanai-Babu.'

They were simple blacksmiths, but they seemed to know a good deal about the world. 'We can't do it on less than two rupees per knife', they insisted, 'you'll have a lot of clear profit even if you pay us that much'.

Kanai was resolved to show his mettle. He was never used to haggling but he knew of course how it was done. He assumed an air of authority and said emphatically, 'The company just won't pay more than one-and-twelve at the very outside. Take it or leave it.'

They seemed rather cowed by Kanai's air of determination and one of them put in hesitantly, 'Let go of it, sir, at one-and-fourteen. Don't please say 'No'.'

Kanai hesitated and went out to Amal for instructions. 'You could have got them to agree to a cheaper rate if you persisted—anyway, let's settle it at one-and-fourteen', Amal said. In a moment there came a voucher, and Kanai saw to his surprise that sixtytwo rupees and eight annas was to be given him as his commission.

"You see", said Amal, "We were ready to pay up to two rupees. You have brought it down by two annas, and we are giving you one anna on each knife as the commission you have earned."

Twice sixtytwo-and-eight was a hundred and twenty-five rupees, he reflected, and he had deprived the poor blacksmiths of that money. He could not feel exactly elated with the money in his pocket.

'You'll have to come tomorrow morning by eleven', Amal told him as he left office.

Kanai walked down to Curzon park and sat on a bench.

He kept on thinking of Amal and what he had said. So it was Kanai who helped the company to make a little more profit. Anyhow, he had shown he was no nincompoop . . . . But he felt restless all the same.

The offices had closed and the streets were congested. He went up to the Esplanade Tramways shelter and happened to see Neela there. All his ennui seemed to vanish at once.

Neela was looking at the periodicals displayed in the newsstall, and Kanai found himself standing behind her. She looked round, and her pre-occupied look changed into one of sincere pleasure. 'Oh, it's you!', she said.

'Yes, comrade', Kanai replied. He did not say 'Miss Sen' this time, but the next moment he got rather self-conscious with all that crowd surrounding them. 'Let's go to the coffee house', he said, 'I want to talk to you'.

'I see you want to give me a courtesy return for that other morning', Neela smiled.

'No, it isn't that. There's a lot I want to tell you and I have earned some money for the first time in my life.'

'Have you got a job somewhere? Have you given up studies in that case?'

'I've given up studies anyway, but I haven't got a job. really. I'm trying to set up in business.'

'I see', said Neela, and they walked down together.

There was quite a crowd in the Coffee-house. Kanai could not tell Neela what had lately happened to him—a blow which came in a terrible garb had brought him hopes of freedom and wellbeing. He could not talk about all that as they drank their coffee. They talked about other things—about the Party and Neela's work.

Coming out of the restaurant, Neela asked, 'But you

haven't told me a word about yourself and you said you wanted to!'

'Shall we go back to the Park?' Kanai enquired.

It was getting dark and the street-lights were on already. Neela looked round and said, 'Will you forgive me, please? Father will be worried if I don't get back now.'

'Well—in that case— there's so much to tell', Kanai ended 'up lamely.

'Why not give me a summary of it tonight—we shall meet again later', Neela pleaded.

'No, I can't give a summary of it all. It's a long story, I didn't tell you last time we met, but I want to, badly, now.'

'All right, then,' said Neela, 'Let's meet the day after tomorrow—Saturday, at Curzon Park. Then perhaps we can walk up to Eden Gardens—shall we?'

'That'll be all right. I shall be waiting for you'.

'Perhaps you'll find *me* waiting for you', Neela smiled. 'I am more keen on hearing your story than you are about telling me'.

'Then I must tell you something, right now', said Kanai, his voice faintly tremulous. 'I'm a free man now, comrade. I've broken my bonds. I have broken off all contact with the family.'

Neela stared at him in surprise.

'Today I feel free, utterly free', Kanai went on, 'and I want to organise my life in the new set-up. It's for that I want to talk to you, Neela, I want your advice. . . . You're not annoyed with me for talking in this strain', Kanai checked the flow of his words.

'Of course, I'm not annoyed', Neela answered.

They were near a tram-stop and a tram now came.

Back to his lodgings, Bejoy's flat, that is to say, Kanai saw his host was frightfully busy. He stood at the foot of the stairs, anxiety written on his face. Shasthi had gone to fetch a taxi.

A beggar girl lay there, groaning in pain, and Geeta was fanning her. Two little children stood by and were crying profusely. Obviously it was their mother lying down there.

The girl was in an advanced stage of pregnancy, and probably the pains of childbirth had begun.

It seemed she was a Mussalman from a southern Bengal district. She had lost her husband in the recent cyclone and then had to evacuate the village on military orders. She had trekked to the great city in quest of food and shelter, two children hanging on to her hands and another in the womb and now the child inside of her was struggling to see the light of day.

Bejoy had to attend office after four o'clock in the afternoon. On his way he had seen the girl lying in the street in that condition hiding her person behind a dust bin, her two little children crying by the roadside. So he moved them to his place and had sent Shasthi to get a taxi and take the girl to hospital.

Bejoy did not say a word about all this to Kanai. 'Where have you been all day?' he merely asked. 'You should have had some sense and given a thought to poor Geeta at any rate.'

A taxi now came with Shasthi beside the chauffeur.

## (XI)

"Geeta!" Kanai called, but there was no reply. He called again, wondered where she was, and entered the

kitchen, to see if she was there. Last night Geeta had wanted to be in the kitchen most of the time and it was only Bejoy's stern insistence which made her go to the only bedroom in the flat. She was a girl who did not have the strength to disobey orders. Of course, she was meek and mild by temperament, but there was in her mildness something of the nervous constraint conditioned by poverty. It was obvious, soon enough, that she felt she was there on sufferance, entirely dependent on the tender mercies of strangers. Kanai could see it most of all, for it wasn't pity he felt for her, but genuine affection. He pushed open the kitchen-door, and called again, "Geeta!"

She wasn't there. Shasthi was coolly smoking a *biri*. He got up hastily when he saw Kanai and concealed the *biri*.

'Where is Geeta?' Kanai asked him. 'Are you asking me, sir?', Shasthi said. 'Yes, yes—who else?', said Kanai, rather annoyed. 'She's in the bath-room, has been there some time', he replied. 'What?' Kanai said in surprise, 'Why is she having a bath now in the evening when it's turned quite cold?' 'I don't know, sir, I didn't ask. She merely said she was going to have a bath'.

Geeta now came out of the bath. She did not have any of her *Saris* with her when she left home, and so she had on one of Bejoy's *dhotis*, her wet hair hanging loose down her shoulders. Seeing Kanai, she gave a pale, modest smile.

'What made you have a bath at this time, Geeta?' Kanai asked her.

She put in quietly, 'I had touched that girl there, that's why'.

Kanai looked at her face intently, and said after a

moment, 'Why must you think a human being could contaminate, Geeta?'

Geeta lifted her timid eyes for a moment and then fixed her eyes on the ground in a guilty manner. She stood there motionless, her whole body appearing to acknowledge the guilt. Kanai could say no more to her, he felt so drawn towards the helpless girl, and it was then that he noticed for the first time that Geeta had put on a *dhoti*. Of course, he should have remembered that she had left home without any clothes but what she had on herself, and he should have got her some more. He needed some for himself too, didn't he? He hadn't had time that day to think of all that, for he had gone out in the morning and couldn't even find time for a bath.

He turned affectionately towards Geeta and said, 'You go and sit near the oven. It's winter, and you must get warm after a cold bath, you know. And look, Geeta, all the old-time notions about the touch of certain people being a pollution we have discarded these days, we think all that was a mistake—even worse, a crime'.

Geeta kept on without a word. 'Now you go and sit near the oven', Kanai repeated.

She mustered some courage and answered, 'But the food's being cooked there'.

'So what?' Kanai asked.

'Maybe, my touch will pollute everything.'

Like an electric shock, what Geeta meant penetrated Kanai's skull. Didn't he belong to an old and respected family? And surely he knew that in families like theirs the code and conventions of a merciless society had to be rigidly observed, though one hardly cared about the real connotation of whatever was called a sin? And surely he should have had the sense to understand what Geeta was hinting—she

knew she was helpless when her body was violated, but she knew also the convention that pronounced her for that reason an untouchable.

'No, no! Geeta! That just can't be so', Kanai broke out vehemently.

Geeta raised her eyes again and looked at him for a moment.

'You are as pure as a flower meant for worship. You are innocent, utterly innocent. Don't worry, my dear!' Kanai spoke in tones of great affection. 'You go and sit near the oven. I'm coming in a little while. I'll buy some *saris* for you.'

Out in the street, Kanai wondered what he should do for Geeta and her future. Why must she always suffer for this humiliation, for this causeless sense of guilt?

This time Geeta did not disobey Kanai's instructions. She was not unaccustomed to bathing in winter evenings, but she felt quite cold, and it was quite pleasant to sit by the fire. She stared at the red glow of the burning coal, and thought how often her evenings used to be spent beside the kitchen-fire, preparing food for the family. How often, she also thought, the kitchen-fire could not be lit at her home, for coal was scarce and prices were exorbitant, and they had to make do with some little uncooked food! How were they getting on at home, she thought, and shuddered. What must they have gone through before her parents had been compelled to do what they did to her! Her whole heart seemed to break with love for them and sorrow and shame at the same time. She thought of her mother—she was at one time so good to look at, now you could count every bone on her body. Perhaps she was crying, crying for the daughter who had not come back. Perhaps her brother, too, had left; he didn't come home for she wasn't

there. And her father, her poor asthmatic father—perhaps he was sitting up on his bed, smoking, coughing, breathing heavily. . . .

What Geeta was thinking was no imaginary picture, it was a reflection of what was actually happening at her home. As a matter of fact, the reality was worse even than she had imagined it to be. For Geeta's father was at that time bed-ridden. He had a cruel attack all day; he could not swallow a morsel. Sarojini, Geeta's mother, was massaging his chest with some hot mustard lotion. Luckily, their son Hiren happened also to be there and he was fanning the sick father. There was an unnatural sort of silence in the room, and nobody spoke a word. Pradyot Bhattacharyya's asthma was so serious that he could hardly utter a groan in between his difficult breathing spells. Airplanes fluttered along in the night sky outside.

After a long bout it seemed Pradyot felt some relief, but the noise of the airplanes made him furious. 'Drop some bombs on my head—right here, blast them, the devil's own machines! Drop some bombs on me and I shall be through with it all. Ah-ah!' He groaned again in recurring pain.

'Would you like to drink some water?' Geeta's mother asked him.

'Water? Yes, yes, give me some.'

Pradyot eagerly gulped down some water, but immediately spat it out and began cursing. 'How it smells of chlorine! Why have you got this wretched tap-water for me?'

Sarojini kept silent, but Pradyot shouted again, 'I see it very clearly—you want to see the end of me, don't you?'

His wife now spoke. 'There's none to fetch water from the tube-well these days'. Her words contained the allusion



to Geeta's absence, for it was she who used to fetch it regularly for Pradyot who did not care for tap-water.

Pradyot put his head down and sighed. Then, of a sudden, he hit his forehead and cried, 'Oh, my God!'

Sarojini was silent, but tears streamed down her cheeks. Even the truant son, Hiren, was moved, and put down the fan to wipe his tears. He had hardly put it down when Pradyot, in sudden anger, picked it up, hit his son on the head with it, and shouted: 'Can't you fetch the water from over there? Who do you think you are—the Prince of Wales? You can't do this much for me?'

Hiren jumped back several paces and shouted back, hoarse with excitement, 'No, I can't, and I won't—not for you, I won't'.

His parents were taken aback for the moment, and he went on shouting, 'It's always me, me, me. I must go and stand in the queue for kerosene, for sugar, for Hell knows what else . . . and I've also to fork out the money for it, and here I come home to get beaten—Huh!'

The lad had learnt to make some money now. His capital was just twelve annas he stole one day from home, but with that money he began queuing up early to buy the lowest-priced seats at a cinema house and sold them at a profit to late arrivals when the show was about to begin and the house was full. He would queue up again before the few shops where sugar was sold at Government-controlled prices, and then sell the stuff again at higher rates to tea-shops who wanted more sugar than they could buy at normal prices. And all day he would wander up and down the town in pursuit of his precarious vocation, from Shambazar to Kalighat. He would board one tram after another, get off a running car to avoid paying the fare and jump on to another. With some bus-conductors he had struck up an

acquaintance, and whenever he chanced to meet one of their buses, it was plain sailing for him. He would then stand on the foot-board and assist the conductor; he would shout, 'The Lakes—Kalignt!—come right up, gentlemen!—Kalignt!' He would help up those who jumped on to running buses, and if he was on a double-decker, he would ask them to go upstairs. 'Please go upstairs, sir—there's plenty of room there, plenty of room'.

A flame of fierce revolt shone suddenly in Hiren's cruel eyes. He no longer suffered, day in, day out, from the chronic misery which had settled on their household; he did not starve any longer. Somehow he managed a meal outside. His shirt and shorts were not too worn either; he had got them lately at the market for secondhand goods. But every minute spent at home, he felt a kind of fierce resentment, particularly against the father. Wasn't he responsible for all that had happened—for Geeta's disappearance? The sight of the irritable, bed-ridden invalid would make him furious, and he would fasten all blame on that creature who happened to be his father! And every time he was home after a long absence, the invalid would brace himself and give the truant boy as much of a hiding as he could manipulate. As a rule, Hiren would bite his lips and restrain himself, but since the day before yesterday, when Geeta disappeared, he had wandered everywhere, in likely and unlikely places, in search of his sister, and was utterly exasperated. Why in the devil's name couldn't his father arrange Geeta's marriage earlier? Yes, the father, he felt, was the villain of the piece. . . . And the old man hitting him with the handle of the fan seemed to put the tin-hat on everything as far as he was concerned, and there followed what in that atmosphere of constraint was no less than an explosion.

Harrowed by disease, but his fatherhood insulted, Pradyot somehow jumped on to the floor and shouted, 'I'll kill you, you villain!'

Vainly the wife expostulated, tearfully anxious. 'No, no . . . Please—don't . . .'

The son stood as if he was never going to move and looked back fiercely—ready, it seemed, for attack. Pradyot hesitated, and the wife rolled at his feet, 'I beg of you, please, please, don't go on this fashion'.

All the pent-up rage of the invalid now spent itself on the poor woman. He beat her with the fan and repeated, 'You! Yes, it's you—you're responsible for everything, everything. . . .'

In a moment Hiren pulled his father down, dragged the fan away from his hand and began beating him, mercilessly.

'What shame! son, what are you doing?', the mother tried to stop him. 'Let go of me', he shouted. 'No, no, I won't', she replied with desperate anxiety, 'I know you'll go away now—don't, please don't, child.'

Hiren gave a jerk and shook her off, and the next moment he vanished. He did not hesitate for a thought. He knew already that there were many ways in which a man could make a living. You could wait in dark alleys and snatch away from helpless pedestrians whatever they had. You could cheat—in a variety of ways. In dubious quarters, you could show the way to travellers in search of pleasure. And ah, you could mint money if you knew the ropes and could sell drinks to thirsty souls after closing time.

He passed some narrow lanes and reached an open space along a main road. There were slit-trenches here and there, a cemented air-raid shelter on one side. It was dark

and smelly, but there was a nip in the air, and he wanted warmth and walked across to it. What was that glowing rather queerly, he thought. Was it a hissing sound he heard? 'God almighty! Is it a snake or something?' His heart began to sink, but he was not so unlucky, it was a cow straying in like himself for warmth! 'Blast the animal!' he cursed, and then he lit a match to see where it was dry and he could settle down for the night.

Airplanes roared overhead. He lit an uncomfortable *biri*, made a wry face and broke out, 'Damn, damn, God damn all this rot! . . . Why don't you blackguards drop a few bombs and we're done with it all!' Like his invalid father, he was utterly disgusted with everything about him. Why didn't everything come down in sheer ruin, so that, maybe, the coast would be clear for him to begin on a clean slate? This was for him quite an accustomed desire. How often had he wanted an earthquake, or epidemics that would kill off the majority of the people around him! How often had he dreamt of supernatural power—power to defeat death, to have life and death at his command, doling death to some and life to others! It was queer, but he could not resist such wish-fulfilling fantasies crowding his semi-demented brain. They brought bitterness and disillusionment, these silly fantasies, but he could not help them. And that dingy night, with airplanes roaring unmeaningly overhead, the fantasies returned to him, and he muttered, half-asleep, that the bombs should drop—yes, all over the whole wretched place, he *wanted* bombs to rain death and destruction.

## (XII)

It was late when Kanai got up the next morning. Bejoy had to wake him. They had both slept, like the

night before, on the verandah, and Geeta had been sent to sleep in Bejoy's only bed room.

'It's awfully late already', Kanai yawned.

Bejoy laughed. It was more than a habit with him to laugh. Of course, it is natural to laugh at a joke, but Bejoy would laugh when he was grieved or even angry. Nobody had seen him cry and there were no data to decide whether he laughed when he wept. 'I say, brother', Bejoy laughed, 'you better buy some pyjamas, a dressing gown and bed-room slippers. Then you won't find any shame in getting up at half-past eight. And well, if you smoke a pipe, you can get up at ten and give everybody a damn for it. For then you'll climb from pale to pure middle-class-dom. Ha! Ha!'

Kanai had told him the night before of his first day's adventure in the business world. He felt slightly discomfited, but he said, 'Ah well, I shall see tomorrow who gets up first'.

'Don't put a wager on it, Kanoo, for you'll lose.'

'So you think, don't you? Alright, let's have the bet.'

Bejoy laughed again and said, 'Listen, lad, I've heard from reputable physicians that a disease has two main varieties of symptoms: one is too obvious, everybody can see the patient suffering and the doctor has no trouble at all the other kind is subtle, you can't get at it easily, you see. . . . Now let's have a few examples. Take dyspepsia. You know the first kind of symptoms—indigestion, stomach-ache, retchings etc. But there is also the other kind of symptoms—a passion for forbidden food and distaste for whatever is prescribed! Then take a fellow who is suffering from baldness. Well, hair dropping off and the pate glistening more and more brightly—these are the visible symptoms; but the subtler symptom is rubbing fingers on

the bald pate. He does it when he sits down contented, and of course when he is worrying over something. The snag is that he does it even when he is not worrying, too. Similarly, the visible symptom of prosperity, bourgeoisification if you please, is—well, a certain haughtiness of manner, a desire to control other people's destinies, etc. But the less blatant symptoms are—getting up late, talking big, a pipe, pyjamas and a dressing gown and God knows what. Don't they say something about a millionaire's sleep? Your sixtytwo rupees are a good beginning, aren't they, my lad?'

Kanai kept looking at Bejoy's face. 'So I've made you cross, haven't I?', Bejoy asked with a twinkle in his eyes. 'No, Bejoy-da, you haven't, but do you advise me to give up business?' 'Don't let's discuss all that now. You go and have a wash. There's Geeta, with the tea.'

Turning round, Kanai saw Geeta coming towards them, with two steaming cups of tea. 'I have started her on work', said Bejoy, 'isn't she a nice, quiet little girl?'

Kanai smiled at Geeta affectionately. She had got up early and had already had her bath, though it was pretty cold that morning. She had on the new, striped *Sari* which Kanai had bought her the night before. Kanai got on to his feet quickly and said, 'I'll have a quick wash and shall be back in a minute.'

When he returned to his tea, Nepi had already arrived. He also had a cup of tea in his hand. Usually so shy, he seemed flushed with excitement. Something must have happened, which moved him strongly, and Nepi, generally tongue-tied, was speaking breathlessly, while Bejoy lazily listened. Geeta came out of the room with another cup which she gave Kanai.

Nepi was talking of his recent experience, of what he had seen during relief operations. He had seen a family

too respectable to go begging on the streets, committing suicide—the whole lot of them together. Husband and wife and a grown-up daughter—they had tied a water-vessel to their necks and jumped into the river to drown.

A queer smile still faintly skirted Bejoy's lips ; without a word he kept puffing at a cigarette. Geeta listened, her eyes agape.

'I heard also of lots of people selling their children', said Nepi, 'the young girls especially'.

Kanai felt rather faint, but Bejoy spoke almost casually, 'Geeta, Kanai has to attend office. You better go and ask the servant to hurry or it'll be midday before the food is ready. Now, then, don't stay here, you go ahead'. Obediently, Geeta moved away.

'Bejoy-da, we must send more relief', Napi said. 'I say, Bejoy-da, why dont you speak?', he added. 'Yes, you're right,' said Bejoy with a weary smile.

Somehow the assurance seemed to comfort Nepi. He looked at Kanai, smiled but did not speak, and went away.

'Bejoy-da', Kanai spoke this time.

'What do you advise, Bejoy-da', he went on, 'Shall I give up this line of business?'

'Aren't you being silly, Kanoo? I said all that as a sort of joke. Money's badly needed in this world, brother. And where exploitation goes on in full swing and you just keep out of the dirty game, you don't stop it that way, do you? . . . Think of my case for a change, Kanoo, I must be a kind of exploiter too. I get a hundred and fifty, the compositors—worthy fellows all of them—get thirty, and the peons—such useful people—get fifteen or so. I'm also entangled in this exploitation machine'.

Kanai did not speak. 'Money comes in handy for ever

so many things,' Bejoy said, 'Now think of it—I want some money badly now, for a winter cloak', he smiled.

Kanai smiled back but did not speak.

Bejoy spoke again, 'Then there's Geeta. We have to make arrangements for her, for her future'.

Yes, Kanai wondered, he had got to make some arrangements for Geeta. Her life must not be messed up. And she was so helpless, so shy, so weighted down by a hundred inherited inhibitions! 'I worried a lot about her last night, Bejoy-da', he said, 'but I couldn't make out anything. Could you tell me what I should do about her?'

Bejoy smiled quietly and said, "Well, my dear boy, I have told you already what I think is the best course for you to take up, but you didn't like it'.

Kanai recalled Bejoy's advice that he should marry Geeta.

Instantly his thoughts turned towards Neela. Wasn't it Friday, and wasn't he to meet Neela the day after—on Saturday? He felt a sudden sting of excitement all over himself.

'You think over what I said, Kanai'.

'No, Bejoy-da, that can't happen'.

Bejoy did not speak again. Geeta came in and announced that food was ready. 'You go and have your bath, Kanoo-da', she said.

'I say, you do look *chic* in those clothes', Amal said to Kanai at the office, 'but for office purposes you should get an English suit, I think'.

'Well', Kanai replied, 'I suppose I'll have to, if it's necessary'.

'Of course it is necessary. You see, I want to start you



on work, real work, straightaway. I'll send you several places to-day'.

Kanai felt quite bucked and went to his work happily. He returned to the office at about four in the afternoon. 'Now you report results', Amal asked him, and was pleased to hear what he had done. Jitoo Bose, the workshop manager, was there too and beamed approval of the novice's success.

After office hours, Amal lit a cigarette. 'Bearer', he called out, 'send Guin Babu here'. Then he turned towards Jitoo, 'I'll take you to a new place to-day, Jitoo-da'. 'I must be in luck', Jitoo replied. 'But you can't get back home tonight', said Amal, 'You'll be staying here'. 'Home! Have I a home?', asked Jitoo, 'my home's where I happen to be'. 'But I say, this is too bad, you better get married', said Amal.

'Married?' Jitoo burst out, 'may all the gods in heaven protect me? What nightmares you talk about?'

It seemed that Amal had heard this kind of thing before. But he looked amused. 'What makes you so worked up?' he asked.

Jitoo lowered his voice. 'I'll tell you what. D'you know a saying in Urdu—it's about our sort of people. It's about chaps who are here in the morning and there in the evening, who live all their lives in hotels and die in hospitals. That's us. Marriage and a home are banned for us, just banned'.

Amal laughed, and Kanai laughed too. He was rather pleased to notice Amal's spirit of good fellowship, for after all Jitoo was his servant and he did not seem to make him feel it.

Guin Babu, already sent for, now arrived. He was an elderly man, in a *dhoti* with a gaudy border, a *kurta* slit

at the side, and a *Chaddar* hanging in coils down the shoulders. He came and stood with folded palms, the very picture of obsequiousness. 'This is Mr. Chakravarti, our new agent', Amal told him rather distantly. 'You'll take him round everywhere tomorrow and introduce him to everybody'. 'All right, sir,' Guin bowed as he spoke, and then bowed to Kanai. Kanai politely returned the bow, but Amal looked annoyed and pushed him a *chit*. 'Return this man's salute only by a slight nod', it said.

Amal spoke again to Guin, 'Mr. Chakravarti will also be looking after our business, he'll be a partner. You understand?'

'O yes, sir, of course, sir. I shall explain everything to him as soon as he is ready'.

'Mr. Chakravarti is an M.Sc., you know', Amal said, 'and besides, you have heard of Sukhamay Chakravarti of Shambazar, haven't you?'

'Oh, haven't I, sir? Who hasn't, I ask you, sir? When Sukhamay Babu's sons drove their coach-and-four through Chitpur in those days . . . wasn't there some commotion? Those were days, sir! They would never touch copper *pice*, and would throw a *rupee*, a whole *rupee*, when they bought a garland!'

'That'll do, Guin, but remember our new Agent is Sukhamay Babu's great-grandson.'

'Bless my soul', Guin exclaimed and moved to take the dust of Kanai's feet. 'Please don't,' Kanai shrank back.

Amal was a little surprised, but the next moment he laughed again. He could see that Kanai could not quite relish the Guin brand of utter obsequiousness. He quickly changed the atmosphere by talking business again. 'Yes, Guin, you get me quick a receipt for sale of a hundred *maunds* of rice—stamped and signed. We're selling to

Kanai-Babu, and the goods will be delivered from our godown No. 2 when the receipt is produced'.

'A hundred *maunds*? Fifty bags? Guin asked in surprise.

'Yes', said Amal, 'Father has given special permission for Kanai Babu's sake'.

'But, sir,' Guin seemed to whine, 'Retail transaction's a lot of trouble. Couldn't you make it at least a thousand *maunds*?

'No, no, you do what I tell you', Amal snapped at Guin.

When the receipt was ready, Amal told Kanai, 'Let's go now, you have to sell the stuff. Guin, you come along too'. They all got into Amal's car—Jitoo, Guin, Kanai and Amal. Inside of an hour, Guin sold the rice at a big stores, and even handed over the cash to Kanai. Amal turned towards him with a smile and said, 'You've made a clear profit of two-and-a-half rupees per *maund*. So you keep two hundred and fifty rupees and give me back the rest'. Then he whispered into Kanai's ear, 'Give Guin a tip—four annas in the *maund*—twentyfive rupees. Not in my presence, call him aside and give it to him'.

Kanai did as he was told. This time he could not prevent Guin taking the dust of his feet! 'You'll see, sir, what I can do', he whispered. 'You manage five hundred *maunds*, sir, and a week's credit, and then you'll see what I can do, sir'.

Kanai smiled, but it was forced, he really had to make an effort. What he had seen the last two days had well nigh chilled his soul, all his sense of values seemed to be turning topsy-turvy. What a gamble was afoot everywhere! And where others thought the winners were just lucky, he saw them to be little else but swindlers. Bejoy's sardonic sallies came back to his mind.

'I say, Chakravarti', Amal called out to him, 'come along, I shall reach you home'.

'No, thank you', Kanai replied politely, 'You better go home. I shall take a tram or a bus'.

'Out with all this modesty', Amal said jauntily, 'Come along please, I'm going your way'. He turned his car in the direction of Kanai's residence.

'But I'm not going home', said Kanai. 'Well then', Amal rejoined, 'Where on earth do you propose to go?'

Kanai gave him Bejoy's address. 'Right-ho' said Amal, 'I'll reach you there'.

The car sped smoothly on. 'What a hell of a lot of trouble we're having these days about petrol', Amal complained. 'Even the black market can't always supply what we badly need. Or I would have got you as Agent a secondhand car from out of the Company's funds'.

'I go left—down this lane', said Kanai, and Amal's car swerved skilfully into the narrow street. When he got off, Kanai stood silent for a moment, he could hardly brace himself up to saying a word of thanks. 'Cheerio', Amal waved, 'See you at ten tomorrow'. Jitoo Bose put his head out of the window and gave a military salute.

The door of the house opened at that moment. Perhaps Geeta had seen them in the car from upstairs. She was now at the door, pale and trembling all over. Kanai was frightened to see her in that state. He held her by the arm and said, 'Geeta! What has happened?'

She was looking at the car, her eyes unnaturally dilated. Kanai turned towards the car and saw Amal also looking rather queer. 'Do you know this girl, Chakravarti?' he asked. 'Yes, she's my sister.'

At once Amal looked away, the engine roared and the car moved quickly out of the lane.

'Who is that man, Kanai-da? Who's he?' Geeta asked.

'That's Amal Babu, you know. I'm learning work at his office. Have you met him before?

Geeta looked utterly miserable and awe-struck. 'Kanooda', her voice broke, 'that was the man . . . that wicked old woman took me to where that . . .' she could say no more.

Kanai felt as if the whole world was whirling around him, as if there was a terrific earthquake and the enormous Dalhousie Square mansion of his imagination was falling in ruins like a house of cards! So it was Amal, the man whom he had come to like and admire—Amal, ridden with sin unspeakable! . . . He thought at once of his own ancestors—wasn't it their history repeating itself with Amal? So it was for disease and degradation that men made money, cheated poor fellow-men of their rights and piled up profits? And the infant symptoms of furtive disease had got hold of Amal too? In time, surely, his family would get to be like Kanai's—diseased and demented! He got up suddenly and put his hand into his pocket. The notes rustling there—the two-hundred-and-twentyfive rupees he was supposed to have earned were like an incendiary bomb ready to burst. He walked a few paces, rolled up the notes and flung them into the dust-bin.

### XIII

There was no fixed hour when Bejoy returned from work. But as a rule he was never back before ten. That night, however, he returned when it was hardly eight. Kanai was still sitting on the verandah, speechless and inert. In the room Geeta lay on the floor, weighed down by a hundred worries. It was such a surprise for her to see Kanai return with that other man, and then Kanai's grave

silence disturbed her. She had not dared ask any questions, she had taken shelter, so to say, in the kitchen and wept with silent effusion, an insufferable anxiety stuck like a stone in her throat. What was it that was now in store for her? And what on earth had that man told Kanoo-da? Perhaps the villain had wormed his way into Kanoo-da's confidence and told him that it was Geeta who had wanted to sell him her body, and perhaps that wicked old procuress had testified to the proceeding? Geeta shuddered to recall that gruesome time, how she had cried out in helpless agony and the old woman had taunted her, accused her of posing her virtue and angling for a better price . . .

There was only one other person in the house and that was the servant. But Shasthi was completely incurious. 'Shall I make you a cup of tea?' he had once asked Kanai who shook his head in reply. He asked no further questions, but sat out on the ledge and smoked a *biri*. Since night-fall, he was making desultory preparations for cooking the dinner, and seeing Geeta in misery, once asked, 'What's happened, child?' For reply he got from her only a tearful shaking of the head.

It was an ambiguous gesture and might have meant either 'nothing has happened', or 'I shan't tell you'. Shasthi was discreet and asked no more.

'God Almighty! What in the devil's name has happened?', Bejoy asked Kanai as he came in, and Kanai let fall a deep sigh. 'By Jove, what a sigh!' Bejoy laughed, 'Are you having breathing exercises these days?' He threw the attaché-case on to the bed and laughed again. But Kanai said nothing. 'I saw nothing of you since the morning,' Bejoy went on, 'You must be hellishly busy making money, eh? But you left me to face a good deal of your music, anyhow—Geeta on one side, and Nepi on the

other! Bejoy waited a moment for Kanai to speak, but when he did not, he continued: 'You see, after you left this morning Geeta started crying again, and meanwhile the good Nepi suddenly arrived. The poor lad looked around and turned quite pale. You should have thought from the look on the lad's face that the world was coming to an end! What in goodness' name was the matter, I asked, and found out he wanted to know where his Kanoo-da had gone to. I reassured him, told him that their Kanoo was not leaving his admirers in the lurch to look for luck elsewhere. Poor Nepi smiled weakly and then added that their Kanoo-da was to have gone to a meeting of the People's welfare Committee and that they had many complaints about the Committee's work. Well, I reassured him. "Your lost leader will be back soon", I told him, but Nepi just sat there waiting for his hero . . . Well, there was Geeta weeping on one side, and Nepi waiting, obviously disconsolate, on the other. It was too much, my dear fellow, it was too much for me to bear. So I went with Nepi to their Committee meeting to see what could be done. Anyhow, what on earth is the matter with you? Have you lost a lot of money in business? Or have you grabbed a goodly profit and started thinking grave thoughts of mystic significance?' Bejoy laughed again.

There was about Bejoy a kind of infectious gaiety, and Kanai woke out of his contemplation, his mood of dumb despair seemed to pass. 'I never believed in Fate', Kanai sighed as he spoke, 'but things have happened today which I can't explain away as accidental. There seems to have been a dramatic unity about it all, and fate has prompted my wanderings on a queer stage. It's strange!'

'Ah! That's perfectly all right', Bejoy said pleasantly,

'You go ahead, brother, with your new-found belief in fate. It'll save you many worries'.

'Save me from worries!' Kanai rejoined, 'You don't know, Bejoy-da. Fate has very kindly prepared for me a whole train of misfortunes'.

'No', Bejoy grunted through rings of smoke which he was calmly manipulating.

'How d'you mean?' asked Kanai.

'Ah well, if there is irony in fate doling out misfortunes, it's easy enough to suffer it all, smiling away the time. Now, this is what I advise you to do. You yield to your fate, and then at least two other people, besides you—Geeta and me—can avoid misfortune. "Birth, death and marriage are pre-destined matters"—isn't that what they say? Now, you bow down to your fate, accept its workings and marry Geeta.'

Kanai was visibly irritated. 'Let me beseech you, Bejoy-da, I don't quite like your pleasantries.'

Bejoy kept quiet for a while, then raised his voice and called, 'Geeta!'

Pale and hesitant, Geeta came up to him. Bejoy looked sharply at Kanai and then told the girl, 'No, little sister, this wasn't the contract I made with you.'

She stood there, shy and silent, and Bejoy went on, 'Well we're both under a contract now, aren't we? It's that you must smile as we meet. Yes, smile—smile—that's better, now.' There was flicker of a smile on Geeta's face, and Bejoy said, 'Yes, that's right. Now, let's have some tea—the best tea you can make us, eh?'

Geeta smiled broadly this time and went off to make the tea. Bejoy continued to smoke.

'Bejoy-da?', Kanai asked.

'Yes'.



'I want to tell you about to-day's happenings'.

'All right, fire away'.

Kanai began in an emotional vein, 'Didn't I tell you, Bejoy-da, in the whirl of events . . . .'

'Now then, that'll do', Bejoy interrupted, 'I work on a newspaper, my dear Kanoo, and we cut out such flowing prefaces. You better tell me just what happened, without the trappings'.

This time Kanai smiled. And then he began. Quietly he related the day's events and added, 'I told you last night—didn't I?—that you needn't bother about me or about Geeta. I had thought that I was getting the support of a big man in business and so could easily train up Geeta properly. But unwillingly, I have accepted the help of that very man who has brought all this misery on Geeta, I took from that blackguard this two-hundred-and-twenty-five rupees . . .'

'You give me that money,' Bejoy spread out his hand.

'Oh, I've thrown all that into the dust bin over there'.

'What? You nitwit!' Bejoy rose immediately and called out, 'Shasthi! Shasthi!'

The servant came up and Bejoy told him, 'Look here, Shasthi, Kanoo-Baboo has by mistake thrown away into that dustbin some notes worth two hundred and twentyfive rupees along with other waste paper. Now if you can search there and get back even two hundred and fifteen, I'll give you five rupees as reward. Could you manage it?'

'Yes, of course', the servant put in eagerly, 'Let me get the lantern'.

'No, not the lantern; you better get the big torch'.

'Why bother, Bejoy-da?', Kanai put in.

'Now, out with your inanities! To fling money into dustbins out of hate and to throw coins into the water for

entertainment is the same sort of silliness'. Bejoy spoke with a touch of reprimand in his voice.

'But the money was mine and I have thrown it away', said Kanai.

'It's a good job you haven't burnt the notes, anyhow,' Bejoy replied. 'Tomorrow I shall get Geeta admitted in a Nurses' Training School. That money'll come in handy, for my bank balance is twentyeight rupees and odd annas.'

'Are you going to take that money for Geeta's training?'

'Yes, of course. Besides, now that we know the culprit, I can get him to fork out all the money needed for Geeta's education.'

Kanai spoke harshly this time, 'A sense of honour isn't quite a bad thing, Bejoy-da. You may be lost to all sense of shame, but to spend that money on Geeta's education would be heaping on her the utterest insult and humiliation'.

For a moment Bejoy's eyes flared up, but before he could speak Geeta came in with two cups of tea. He checked himself instantly, and welcomed her smilingly with a verse excerpt from Tagore:

"Your mind's bent with the unseen load of loving kindness ;  
like clouds held up in their gambol,

you wait, expectant, aching for abnegation,  
aching to quench earth's thirst."

I say, Geeta, you should have been named *Kajali*.'

Geeta looked up questioningly, and Bejoy recited again:

"Like oblation to the gods,  
Are the tears in your eyes, grave and sweet,  
Tears that are laughter's playmate,  
That emit a quiet shadow,  
Strained and yet so calm,  
On your eye-lashes, deep and dark—  
Is *Kajali* your name?"

'Right you are then, Geeta', Bejoy went on heartily, '*Kajali* shall be your name and you'll be joining a nurses' training centre as *Kajali*. That'll be fine'. He sipped the tea noisily and said, 'Ah! this is wonderful. Why not have a cup, Geeta?'

Geeta was stroking a corner of the table and spoke without looking up: 'Bejoy-da!'

'I say! you needn't call me like that when I am right here before you waiting for you to speak! You *are* a shy creature!'

'Weren't you referring to nurses who go on military duty? The training doesn't take long and one gets an allowance right from the start?'

'Yes.'

'Please, Bejoy-da, let me join up then'.

Bejoy had not answered before Kanai put in strongly, 'No, Geeta, that isn't the kind of job which is good for you.'

'Please, Kanai-da,' she pleaded, 'don't please stop me joining up'. And without waiting a moment longer, she rushed out of the room.

It was exactly then that Shashti came into the room, his body smeared over with dust and dirt. He had rummaged the currency notes out of the dustbin and now put them in a rumpled heap on the table. 'Here you are, sir', he said triumphantly.

'You keep it with you for the time being, Shashti', Bejoy said gravely, 'I'll collect it later.'

'Bejoy-da!' Kanai said in a tone of admonition.

'I'll hand over that money to the Party—as an anonymous subscription.'

'You will have your own way, Bejoy-da. But please, Bejoy-da, don't let Geeta go in for War service.'

They were both silent for a while, and then Bejoy

spoke: 'Do you know, Kanoō, you have treated Geeta terribly shabbily'.

Kanai looked up, rather mystified.

'Geeta loves you and it's unrequited'.

'But, Bejoy-da, you're making an awful mistake. I have never loved Geeta, never thought of her as my wife . . . Please, Bejoy-da, you must believe me, I've always thought of Geeta in the same way as of my sister Uma . . . Besides—no, it just can't be'. He ended up, absent-mindedly.

After a few moments of silence, Kanai spoke again: 'You take charge of Geeta, Bejoy-da, and I don't need to worry on her account, and then, get me some sort of a job.'

'A job? But what's happened to your business?' Bejoy asked in surprise.

'No, Bejoy-da, I've said goodbye to that kind of business. If I could produce something and sell it, I would be happy. So I want to sell my labour-power. That's all I have, isn't it?'

'You're right', Bejoy said, and he lit a cigarette and spread himself comfortably on the bed.

'Bejoy-da?' Kanai asked.

'Yes, Kanai, I'm thinking what I can do for you. Yes, our paper—the Bengali edition—wants an assistant in the news department, but you'll have to be on duty every night? Could you do it?'

'Of course yes . . . That's exactly the kind of job I want.'

'Right you are then', said Bejoy, and emitting rings of smoke added indifferently, 'Let's have our beds made out on the verandah, like last night'.

The early moon was going down; the darkness seemed to be seeping up from the earth to the sky. The lanes were beginning to be enveloped in gloom; only on the terraces of the tallest houses were faintly glimmering the lustreless rays of the sinking moon. Could moonlight be like the purplish

haze emitted by a smoky lantern? And in the midst of it all, were the brick palisades on the roofs, like black silhouettes with a copper background . . . The cold, too, was more bitter than the night before. And as in every night, somewhere in the sky planes were roaring their way. Were they going towards Chittagong or Cox's Bazaar or to the south-eastern defence area? Or were they back in their vigil on the great city? The first fortnight of December had seen Chittagong raided four times—four times in three days. Perhaps the people there were sitting up, sleepless, their ears anxiously expectant, gaping out into the ominous darkness. Perhaps the innocent noise of a motor car being started shocked and worried the people there. Poor folks! . . . But in that tension there was equanimity—as among beggars who huddled together in the cold, under the dubious shelter of awnings projecting into the street from pretentious mansions. . . .

Bejoy came out, remarked how delightful it would be to sleep under a thick cotton quilt, and added: 'Kanoo, listen to what Reuter's sent out last night. It's about Leningrad during this siege—it's really wonderful. I brought it specially for you: "It was the dead of night. Frost and blizzard. With a hiss and a clang, shell after shell passed overhead. Somewhere from around the corner red flames shot upwards and thunderous explosion reverberated through the street.

"A nurse was moving up quickly with another man, the snow crunching under their feet. They had got to hear of a girl lying on the street in the throes of childbirth—perhaps already the infant was born. They ran from snowpile to snowpile, stopped and listen. And even as they moved, they strained their ears to listen to even the suggestion of a cry from the anguished mother." . . .'

For quite some time, Bejoy and Kanai sat there without a word. A time-piece in the room ticked monotonously away. From the room where Geeta was asleep, they could hear faint traces of her breathing. There were no more planes overhead—at least, no sound could be discerned.

Of a sudden, Bejoy asked: 'Are you in love with someone else, Kanoo? That's what I seem to guess'.

Kanai did not answer. It was to be Saturday the day after, he thought. A bitter smile formed itself on his lips. No, he would not keep the appointment with Neela. He had no right—none at all—to poison Neela's life with his own. Weren't cells in his body tainted, his mind seared, and his life riddled by poverty? He had no right to love anybody, anybody whatever. He would not, he decided, go to Esplanade on Saturday.

#### XIV

Getting up early Saturday morning, Neela thought of the date—and the appointment at Curzon Park. But her father's husky voice interrupted her musings.

'My digestion doesn't seem to be alright these days', Devaprasad was telling his wife. 'I don't think I should have *rotis* at night'.

The price of necessities had taken a further, sudden leap. Rice was selling at eighteen rupees a maund, *Atta* at twentyfive, sugar was unavailable, and if you stood in a queue for Kerosene in the morning you could not hope to come back till the afternoon. The workers in the factories were clamouring for 'dearness allowance'. Clerks, prisoners of respectability, were mute. Neela's parents had nothing to eat in between the two main meals, but now tea and light refreshments for the children would have to

be stopped. Neela thought of such things and her heart gave a sudden sharp thump. And her fond plans for the Saturday afternoon seemed slowly to sink like a lamp burning out its oil. She drew the newspaper towards her. Devaprasad would read it first of all and then give it over to her every morning. That day he had left it for her much earlier than was usual.

When Devaprasad talked about food, his wife smiled faintly, her pale face growing paler. She did not reply.

'I'll have a little rice from tonight,' he added.

'But you need only three *Chhataks* of flour,' she spoke now, 'you can't economise much that way, can you?'

'No, no, you don't see the point. You better make the youngsters some *Paratas* in the afternoon with that flour.'

The newsboy came up. '*Babu*, my paper, please'.

Devaprasad's wife did not understand. 'What does he want the paper for?', she asked her husband.

He smiled weakly. 'You see I've made an arrangement with him. He'll bring the paper for me early in the morning and then take it back at about eight. I'll pay half-price, you know . . . Neela?' he called out.

'Yes, father', she answered from inside the room.

'Have you finished reading the paper, dear?'

Neela came out, with the paper in her hand.

'Have you finished?' her father asked again.

'I was reading the Viceroy's speech, haven't quite finished'.

'Oh, he has talked very big, hasn't he? About India being one and indivisible . . . and full justice to the rights and legitimate claims of the minorities.'

'I can't wait much longer, sir,' the newsboy protested.

'Neela, give him back the paper, please'.

Neela looked surprised. Her father seemed to concentrate his attention, quite without reason, on his toe-nails. 'I've arranged with that man', he said weakly, 'to pay half the price of the paper and he'll take it back about half-past eight and sell it again, I expect.'

Neela's mother had a quick look at the front-page news and said in surprise, 'They've bombed Chittagong and Feni again. What are things coming to?'

The newsboy was getting impatient. 'Now, ma'am—' he began, but did not have to finish the sentence. She threw the paper at him, and without wasting a minute he rushed out of the house shouting his ware—'Jap bombs on Feni! Chittagong raided again!'

'I used to look at the paper for a while during mid-day', Neela's mother said, 'and all that's stopped. What luck!' She walked quickly away to the kitchen. Neela sighed: 'But father, you always liked the paper to read again in the evening. You shouldn't have made this new arrangement.'

'No, my child, I've read too much news of the world in my life. It's all so senseless. Nothing happens.' The old man seemed to be getting excited. 'And now we can't let even the infants have the food they need. You—you have had to take on a job.'

'Aren't you pleased, father, that I'm working?'

'Pleased? What a fantastic notion!'

'But father?' she pleaded, 'What's wrong in my going out to work?'

'Now then, darling', he spoke sternly, 'don't let's discuss all that'.

Neela looked up in surprise at her father's face. She felt she had never expected to hear her father talk in that strain. She was grieved, genuinely grieved.



'Let's not discuss all that'. Devaprosad had said, but he spoke again in a tone that was rather flushed. 'If you had built your own life in your own home, Neela, and then gone out to work in an office, I wouldn't have minded, I'd have been happy and proud of you. But you're going out to work today to bear the burden which I alone should carry. It's hellish to feel how I've lost grip over everything—the shame, the sorrow of it all, my utter incapacity . . .'

In a moment, all Neela's resentment vanished, and at the same time she thought again of meeting her comrade that afternoon. He would talk to her about himself, wouldn't he? And this conflict of two different thoughts brought tears to her eyes. She did not hide them before her father; on the contrary she nestled up to him as she used to do when she was a child, put her chin lovingly on his shoulder, and said, 'Is a daughter to be so very different from a son, daddy? Doesn't *Dada* (elder brother) work from sunrise to sunset, and you never say a word? You never hesitate to accept his earnings, do you, dear daddy?'

Devaprasad did not answer. He did not want to give an emotional reply to Neela's question or to invent an answer that would be pleasing but would not be true. As a matter of fact, he did hesitate to accept what Neela had earned by her own efforts. He had given his daughter a fair education; she had read up to the M.A. course. He must, therefore have admitted the right which women should have, equally with men, to earn their own living. It was true, of course, that if the menfolk earned and the women stayed at home and looked after all household work, life could be endowed with a kind of beauty and fascination. Perhaps, the husband and the children could then derive a greater incentive to work and successful endeavour. But it was true, indubitably true, at the same time, that the

inevitable result of that process was in the long run the subjection of woman. Wasn't the great Seeta Ram's partner in life and yet didn't she have to retire into the forest at her husband's behest? Wasn't Draupadi treated as a pawn in a game of chess played by her husband? Devaprasad knew all that, but somehow, inspite of his conviction that women should be free, he could not overcome his repugnance at having to live on his daughter's earnings. In a weak moment he now gave vent to his grief, a feeling that had wound itself into his heart-strings.

'Why don't you answer me, father?' Neela asked, after a while.

'You are right, my dear, your reasoning is unanswerable. I know you are right, but I can't get over my inhibitions, I can't cast out of my heart ideas and conventions to which we've been so long accustomed. . . . For example—', he suddenly stopped short.

'Yes, father?' Neela asked.

'Oh, let that be'.

'No, father, please tell me what is in your mind'.

Devaprasad hesitated a little and then said, 'You see, Nepi is a member of the communist party. I don't know, but I have a notion that perhaps you too have joined up. I agree with your line of reasoning, can't controvert it, but somehow I am not convinced . . . I can't forget things, can't forget how Government slandered Gandhiji as pro-Jap and clapped him in jail . . . .' He stopped midway.

There was a glow in Neela's eyes, as she spoke spiritedly: 'But father, we have raised our voice against this slander more than any other group of people. We feel how it hurts. And release of our national leaders is our primary demand. But surely, father, you can't forget—can you?—that fascist Japan's there already on our eastern frontier, its

paws ready, outstretched? Wouldn't it be a total disaster if in disgust for the British we let the fascists in? Can we forget the lesson of Plassey, can we afford to dig a canal and bring in the crocodile? Wouldn't that mean the end to . . .'

Devaprasad stopped her short. 'Let's not discuss all that, my dear. Politics bores me stiff these days. You are young, you can do what you like, feel whichever way you like. But to me what old Malthus said long ago seems to be true. There are great powers in this world, and we Indians are like parasites in a flower-garden—we aren't wanted. And to be killed off by war and famine and pestilence, that's our destiny.'

In his voice there was such pathos that Neela was touched, and for a few moments felt as deeply despondent as her father.

'But this is too much', Devaprasad flared up again, 'this is too much—dying by inches, fractions of inches, and I can't much longer watch the agony of the children, it's horrid'.

Neela's mother came in to interrupt the discussion. 'Aren't you going to your office to-day, Neela?'

'What's the time, mother?', she seemed to get a start.

'I don't know that, child, but Amar has already had his bath.'

'Oh, it must be late, then', she said and hurried inside the house. Her mother started a sort of soliloquy: 'What wonderful luck's mine! My girl goes to work in an office and I have to prepare her food!' Then turning to her husband, she said, 'Haven't you got to go to Court to-day? . . . It's better if you haven't, for nobody'll brief you', she smiled and Devaprasad also smiled back at her.

Two infants had raised an uproar inside. Amar had

sat down to his meal, and they wanted a share of it. Devaprasad's wife told her daughter-in-law, '*Bow-ma*, you better give them something to eat. And try and see if the little one can eat a little rice and *dal*. The milkman's talking about an increase in prices!'

Her stock of powder was depleted. But Neela never used much of it. She would daub a little powder, just in order to remove the oily glaze which settled on the face after a bath. For several days past, she had thought of buying some more, but every time, while returning from work, she had completely forgotten. But on this occasion she felt quite annoyed with herself. Her conversation with her father was rather dispiriting, but one little sentence that he had spoken had touched a pleasant chord in her heart. "If only you had built your own home in a new life and then gone out to work"—this is what he had said, and the words seemed to twinkle round and round in her mind. Repeatedly she was recalling to herself that it was Saturday. She looked with unwonted frequency at the little mirror before her, and rearranged the hair. It was a job to extricate the few grains of powder clinging to the bottom of the powder-case, but she managed to pour them on a pad and carefully smeared it over the face. She knew she was not beautiful, but she liked that morning her reflection on the mirror.

A new life and a new home! A small flat, perhaps, some light but tasteful furniture, the picture of cleanliness—she wanted just what was needed for two simple lives and no more. A tram came up and she got on to it.

'Vacate the ladies' seat, please', the conductor shouted, and a gentleman who was sitting there got up, felt with his hand the plate with the words 'For ladies' engraved on

it, and remained standing. Neela thought again of Kanai. It was in the same way that Kanai had examined the plate once before!

She had always liked Kanai. As a matter of fact, everyone at College liked him, for he was good-looking and strong, with the stamp of aristocracy on his face. She thought of her college days, when a seed was sown that seemed now to be flowering. How she and her college friends used to talk about Kanai, crack jokes at each other over him. She had never talked to him till they got on to the post-graduate stage. He studied science, while she was in the Arts department, and he was always rather chary of conversation, and as a matter of fact many thought he was too proud. But the girls in college never ceased discussing him when they were together; even the Anglo-Indian girls would join in. Once he had made a well-reasoned speech, spiced with ironic observations that scored debating points at a college meeting, and an Anglo-Indian girl had remarked, 'I say, he has beaten us hollow this time; of course, I had half acknowledged defeat at his hands when I looked at him, but his speech has put the lid on it all'.

A sharp-tongued Bengali girl had put in, 'So I see, Doris, but look, if you want me to, I can pass the word to Chakravarti'.

Doris was not to be outdone, and said, 'Look here, Meena, there are nuts that can't be cracked and I don't want to spoil my teeth trying to break one of that type. But you have the right kind of teeth,—haven't you?—cracking betel-nuts the way you do! So you better go ahead and try, and if you can break him, I don't mind coming into the picture, even after you.'

Neela was a different sort of girl altogether, and she had hardly spoken to Kanai during her college days. She

heard such conversation and perhaps also enjoyed some of it, but she had come to know Kanai only at meetings of the executive committee of the Bengal Students' Organisation. And later, they had met at the Party office. When they met on a tram the other day, it was the only time they had met and talked about personal matters. Since then she felt, they had come very much nearer each other. And Kanai had promised he would talk to her that evening about himself. Her talk with her father that morning was a melancholy business, but she recalled only his reference to a life of her own and she gave free rein to pleasant, un-anticipated imaginings. It was as if the earth was joyfully sucking in the sudden shower that lightning, unannounced, had rent from out of the sky.

The office would close earlier on Saturday, but Neela was eagerly waiting for the closing. And the moment she got off work, she hastened to Curzon Park. She had wanted to see Kanai waiting for her. But he was not there. She was very hurt, but tried to buck up by saying to herself that when Kanai would turn up she would have some pleasant banter at his expense. She sat down, dejected, on a bench. But Kanai did not come. It was nearly six when she got up, determined to wait no longer. She did not go immediately, though, paced a little for several minutes, then drew a deep breath and got on to a tram.

The tram slowly moved, but within the minute a sudden shake-up broke the pre-occupation of her troubled mind. It was a real, tangible shake-up. A row of trams were held up by the traffic at the Esplanade-Dharamtala crossing, and the driver, miscalculating the position, had delayed putting on the brakes. The car dashed against the one waiting ahead of it and the passengers got quite a jolt. Neela's head banged against the wooden window; of

course, she was not seriously hurt, but she smiled as she thought the jolt was a good-humored effort to shake her out of her reverie. What right had she to such reverie, to dreams of wedded bliss, of home and happiness? She was only a dark Bengali girl, and her parents were poor. Kanai might talk as he pleased, he might have bragged about idealism in his student days, but he belonged to an aristocratic Brahmin family and when it came down to brass tacks, he would marry a girl of his own class, bedecked in jewellery and expensive Benares *Saris*. Such a girl, perhaps, would have read only up to the third or fourth form, perhaps she could sign her name with some difficulty in Bengali and in English, could play the harmonium and sing a few cinema songs, could give her own view of the wretched plays produced on the stage. Such a girl perhaps would be a stern mistress, order servants about, and try to win some virtue by giving to beggars the leavings from the table. How she would perform periodic fasts and oblations, tie knots of *Durba* grass on her wrists, practise charities and collect pious merit enough to stand her in good stead from one life to another in her cycle of births! And how she would wish that beggars and destitutes were an eternal feature of life, for otherwise she would have none on whom to practise her philanthropy! Neela smiled to herself at these thoughts. She had got off the tram and was walking, absent-mindedly towards Chowringhee. She did not feel in the mood to go back home immediately.

A number of boys sat in a row on the pavement—shoeblocks, whose trade was a war product. Foreign soldiers, stationed in very large numbers in Calcutta, frequented that area and the boys earned a living by polishing their boots. Possibly the caste-system was getting a knock-out blow during these war years. There were of

course, cobblers in that crowd of shoe-blacks—hereditary leather-workers, who were the majority there—But one could see also a few Bengali middleclass caste-Hindus—maybe, even a Brahmin or a Vaidya—among them. Nobody kept a statistical account, nobody bothered, for it was as if an old and dilapidated system was dying, though it had taken and was still taking an unconscionably long time.

Turning the corner at the southern end of Esplanade, Neela saw a crowd collecting. It looked like another accident, and she hurried to see what had happened. There was a man at the corner, as usual, trying to sell some cheap perfume; he was giving everybody a minute piece of scented oilpaper to advertise his ware. Neela ignored his proffered gift and hurried on.

A third-class hackney carriage had collided with a military lorry. The carriage and its passengers had escaped injury, but the horse—a shrivelled, skin-and-bone apology of a horse—was badly hurt, for the iron cross-piece had dented into his hind-legs and the whole weight of the carriage was falling on his poor back. The accident had just occurred and the coachman, in a dazed condition, was scrambling down from his seat. Blood trailed along a line near the horse's hind-legs. But already a Bengali young man had got hold of the wheels and was trying his hardest to keep the contraption from falling on top of the poor animal. Wasn't it Nepi, Neela wondered. Of course, it was him. His old bike was there too, by the roadside. Neela felt so happy and proud, but Nepi alone could not lift the carriage and there was nobody else forthcoming, though there was quite a crowd there already. Two or three white soldiers were standing a little distance away and watching the fun. Neela was furious, she wanted to throw aside her handbag and she started tying the flowing end of her *sari*



around her waist. But before she could make a move, two men rushed past her to where Nepi was. They were soldiers, white men also, who had just arrived on the scene. They joined hands with Nepi; in a moment they lifted the carriage and the horse could be moved out.

With the coachman now helping them, they washed the animal's wound with water from a wayside reservoir, gave the horse a drink, and shook hands with Nepi . . . Meantime, Neela had arrived on the spot and called, 'Nepi!'

He looked back and his face lit up. '*Didi!*', he said. The two soldiers looked up at her. Nepi seemed to have at last got a topic of conversation with them. 'This is my sister', he told them.

The two soldiers bowed and said with a smile, 'Your brother is a brave lad'.

'I've noticed how you came to his help', said Neela, 'and I want to thank you'.

One of them now said, 'But we've also noticed those countrymen of ours on the pavement who were watching the fun. We're ashamed of them. They're professional soldiers, you know—proper "Tommies"; please don't think we're all like they are.'

'Perhaps we're collecting a crowd here', the other put in, 'Couldn't we go over to the park there and have a talk?'

Their names were James Stuart and Harold Mackenzie. They were both up at Oxford when the War broke out. 'We had heard of a country called India', Harold smiled, 'it was a strange land, we were told when we were young—a land where tigers are found everywhere and enormous snakes infest the streets. Well, that didn't deter us wishing to go to that country. And while at Oxford we heard of your poet Tagore and of Mr. Gandhi. But anyway, we never dreamt we would come here the way we did.'

'What do you think of our country?', Neela asked.

'It's lovely', James answered, 'and when in a train on a long-distance journey, it feels like a magic country.'

'But what about the people? Do they fit in with the picture you got from your story books?'

'Well, when we first reached here', Harold said, 'we did think the people were strange, very strange. It didn't seem so different from what some of our politicians over there at home used to say about your people. We found them—well, rather primitive in their ways, to tell you the truth. But we've learnt to know better since. We know your scholars are first-raters, no whit inferior to ours. And your illiteracy has been very largely the inevitable result of foreign rule. And—' he smiled, hesitating to proceed in that strain.

'Please don't stop', Neela pleaded with a smile.

'Well', Harold smiled back, 'the common people of India are so frightfully poor, and your upper classes keep them too far away—I expect that's why some are called 'untouchables'. And this must weigh on them a lot. They aren't weak, but they feel they are; they don't perhaps even fancy themselves as men, I reckon. It's too bad, really'.

Nepi, tongue-tied as a rule, flared up in a moment. 'But you just don't know', he said, 'that our India was the world's most prosperous country before the British came and got their stranglehold on us'.

'You see why Harold was hesitating', James said, 'he feared he was provoking a controversy'.

'Mr. Sen', Harold said quietly, 'I may be wrong but perhaps your untouchables were just as poor and miserable when India was prosperous. They've always been despised, born underlings'.

'That may be, but there's rich and poor in your

country also. And the poor everywhere have been kept down by the rich, throughout the centuries. But do try and realise that it is worse a hundredfold in a colonial country. And if you observe carefully, you will see that a poor and uneducated Indian Christian has more spirit than a Hindu or a Mussalman of the same position. And that's only because he knows he professes the religion of our rulers.'

Nepi was getting quite excited, but Neela stopped him. 'Let's not have this discussion to-day. We shall resume it if we meet again. Meanwhile, I wish to say goodbye to you.'

'Would you mind if we take a few more minutes of your time?' James asked, 'We want you to put us right on one matter.'

'Of course I wouldn't mind. What is it?' she said.

He took out a newspaper, pointed to an article and asked, 'Is this review dependable? We want to see one of your plays. Have you seen this play yourself?'

It was the review of a play entitled 'Conflict'. Its hundredth performance was to be on the Sunday following, and while announcing the news, the paper had lavished praise on the play. Neela had not seen the play, but had read it and liked it a lot. She had heard also that the stage production was quite a success.

She handed back the paper and said, 'Yes, I know, it'll be quite a worth-while show for you'.

'You haven't seen it yourself, have you?'

'No.'

James hesitated a moment and then told Nepi, 'I say, Sen, we shall be most awfully happy if you come with us to the play. We're trying to read Bengali but haven't got far yet. And if you come with us, you'll explain to us what's

happening. We can't perhaps presume on asking you to—' He turned towards Neela, but had not finished when she said with a smile, 'Well, I can come with Nepi on condition that you two come as our guests'.

They bowed low and said, 'Of course we accept your invitation with the greatest pleasure'.

When Neela got back home, she still felt the load on her mind. The load that had been there since the early afternoon. She lay listlessly on her bed, even without undressing.

'What's happened, Neela? Are you ill?' her mother asked.

'No, mother'.

'Amar is in that other room, with a head-ache, he says. Now you come and stretch yourself on the bed. And why not? I'm everybody's servant. I must reach you all you need—some luck I've got!'

'Has *Dada* got a bad head-ache?' Neela asked. She was used to her mother's way of talking about the problems of the family.

'Who knows what's happened to the head', her mother said as she went out, 'but there's a curse on his forehead. He's lost his job this morning'.

(XV)

On Sunday, Neela got up early, as usual.

Getting up early is a habit with women who belong to the middle class in Bengal. In towns they get up when it is dark still. But that morning Neela had left her bed much too early, for the night had not quite spent itself. She had not had a good sleep, and the day before she had had a most trying time.

Her elder brother had lost his job. Thirtyfive rupees of the family's monthly income, that is to say, had suddenly

vanished. And yet it was his children who really composed the family. He had three boys and a girl. The girl was only six, her maintenance cost very little indeed, for the only considerable item, milk, had been retrenched. The child would get something to eat whenever her grandfather or grandmother or Neela herself sat down to their food. She was being brought up, so to say, on the leavings of others' meals, though of course she was everybody's pet. Neela had protested that things should be arranged differently. But her mother had put her foot down. 'I won't have her go to school', she had remarked, reflecting sourly on Neela's sophistication. 'You needn't have any fear on the child's account, she wouldn't mind in the least'.

Neela knew that her mother intensely disliked her still being unmarried, it hurt her most awfully. And she felt that if Neela has never been to school and college, she would long ago have got married and settled as happily as the fates permitted.

Her sister-in-law would request her, in confidence, not to protest when the child ate out of other people's plates. Neela would understand everything and keep quiet. Her sister-in-law was ashamed that her husband earned so little for the family.

Neela would be so unhappy watching her brother's face. He was a quiet man, unsmiling, his features expressing no deep sorrow either, as good as dumb. One hardly heard his voice when he was at home ; he would never come out of the room and sit and talk with his father. He was as a matter of fact the living embodiment of sheer frustration. Since last night he had not moved out of his room for a moment ; he had refused all food also. He had sent word that he had a headache and kept to his bed. His father had himself

been to ask him to eat something at least, but he had only said, 'Honestly, father, I've got a splitting headache.'

Devaprasad had not said another word. Sitting down to his meal, he had smiled and said to his wife, 'You've seen a snake swallowing a frog, haven't you?'

Neela's mother stared, uncomprehending, and then her father had said, 'You see, our family's like a frog caught by a snake. Well, the poor frog tries to leap out of harm's way at first—it's pathetic, but he tries, he croaks as loud as he can, but the snake gradually devours him and slowly but surely he dies, he ceases to croak and then there's silence.'

That morning Neela felt weary, fagged out. Kanai, failing to turn up at the park, had hurt her terribly. He had spoken to her with such warmth and emotion that she had imagined so many other things. She tried now, repeatedly, to tell herself that it was good that Kanai did not turn up. She would work, work to a standstill, and wipe out every trace of the dream she had conjured up, the dream of a little home of her own. She would bring up her brother's children. That would be her task. Sometimes she had even wanted to give up all contact with political work, she was tired, just too tired.

Meanwhile another worry had added itself to her troubles. What made her, in one moment of indiscretion, invite those two foreigners, James and Harold, to come to a theatrical show with her and Nepi?

They were foreigners, complete strangers both of them, and you could never judge people in a few moments of conversation at the scene of a street-accident. Besides, her father would strongly disapprove of her going to a play with them. He frowned even on coeducation; how much, then, would he resent her meeting the foreign soldiers?

Neela did not agree with her father's views, but she did not wish to hurt him if she could help it. The fighting men from overseas had come to India in hundreds of thousands, they were wandering Calcutta's streets; surely, it was the most natural thing in the world to get to know some of them. But was it advisable to go farther than a mere acquaintance? Of course, there were many decent men among them, but could she be sure what Harold and James were really like? Besides, even the decentest of men had to live in such unnatural conditions in wartime, in an atmosphere of agonising uncertainty, when life seemed such a precarious possession that to drink it to the lees was a natural emotion. Wouldn't love itself, the memory of dear ones left at home, be blurred in such conditions? Or couldn't it be that some of these foreigners, cramped and cribbed, their normal emotions in cold storage, might grow to imagine they were in love, the illusion vanishing naturally enough when the war ended? Neela did not look forward to introducing such likely complications into her own life.

'Who is that? Neela?', Devaprasad called out when he got up.

'Yes, father'. Neela shook herself out of her thoughts. It was getting lighter. She remembered there was a lot of housework on Sundays.

'You've got up very early, my dear', her father remarked.

'Yes', she smiled, 'I have, haven't I?'

The newsboys could now be heard on the streets. The scavengers' cars clattered along. From the main road, some distance away, came the noise of the first tram car speeding along.

'Wonderful news, sir! wonderful news!' The news-

boy, crying his ware with his invariable slogan, was knocking at their door. Neela took the paper from his hands.

'Please, will you pay me to-day—it's three annas?'

'One moment', said Neela, 'but you can give me change for a rupee, can't you?'

'Change? Where shall I get change from these days?'

'Well, in that case, you must come again.'

The man went muttering away. 'Change! Change! Change! everybody wants small change. Where in the devil's name has it all vanished?'

Neela smiled to herself. This had grown indeed to be a problem. Small coins had disappeared by a sort of vanishing trick. One could not go about in trams and buses unless one had some small change on him. The conductors could not let you have any. If you were shopping and wanted back your change, you could not get it. You had to buy at least a full rupee's worth. The day before, they had to buy a rupee's worth even of sagol!

She gave the paper to her father who said, 'The maid hasn't arrived yet, has she?'

'No', Neela smiled, 'but I'll light the oven and get you some tea'.

Tea was the only 'narcotic' that Devaprasad permitted himself!

As father and daughter sat down together with their tea, he read out items of news—'Fight with the Japs in the Arakans', 'The Red Army's Epic struggle', 'Indian soldiers distinguish in African fighting', etc. 'Here's B. R. Sen's report, you better read it to me'. Devaprasad said.

A highly placed officer in the Bengal Government had been to the area devastated by cyclone in Midnapore and given his report. "In one village I saw, one only survived out of a total population of 150. In another, 132 out of



136 had been killed, only four managed to survive. Fifty per cent of the inhabitants have left their homes in search of drinking water, all the ponds in their area rendered useless for drinking purposes on account of the sea-water rushing inland. Hundreds were trying to keep body and soul together in the open fields without anything like a roof to their heads. They need badly drinking water, warm clothing and food. In my tour over many miles I did not see a single cow alive." Neela sighed as she read the passage.

'We're having a taste of paradise', her father said.

He kept silent for a while and then went on, 'The shame of it, Neela! I was trying to work it out last night and felt so utterly ashamed. My father used to say, "Don't look up at those who are better off than you are, for then you'll have so much to regret. Look below, see how there are thousands in a worse hole than you are in, and then you won't have such agony." Well, I thought of that, and more, I remembered our Tagore's words: 'I don't pray to you to save me in my hour of peril, I want to be strong and never to be afraid of dangers'. And I was ashamed of myself, Neela.'

Neela seemed to derive some sort of consolation from her father's words. She glanced through the newspaper, and in the advertisement columns, attractively displayed, she noticed that the play she had invited her foreign friends to, was having its hundredth performance and there was to be a meeting in celebration of it.

She must have done wrong in inviting the foreigners, but she could not get out of it now. What would the foreigners think, if she failed to turn up? What would they report back home about Indians and their ways? It

would not be unfair at all if they formed a low opinion of her people.

'Father!' she asked hesitatingly.

'Yes, dear?'

'You wouldn't disapprove of what I've done?'

'What can it be?' Devaprasad asked in surprise.

'I've asked two of my friends to a play. Everybody's talking about 'Conflict'—it must be good and tonight's the hundredth performance. — will preside over the function'.

By "friends", Devaprasad understood friends of her own sex. 'That's perfectly alright', he laughed, 'Why mustn't you go?'

'I want to take Nepi along with me, father'.

'Certainly'.

Neela used to bring to her father the total amount of her salary every month. It would give Devaprasad a good deal of shame and sorrow which he suffered in secret. He did not approve of anybody going to a theatre; he thought it was money misspent. But he was glad to give her the permission even to waste some of her own money; it seemed to take off a share of the load which was ever on his mind.

Her father's sanction reassured Neela, but she still could not help feeling rather guilty. Four seats would cost eight rupees, at the lowest. But surely, she did not have the means to spend all that money? The children were not getting their milk, prices of everything were soaring out of their reach, her brother had got the sack, and yet she was spending on—well, her luxuries! She could by no means approve of her own conduct.

Neela's sense of remorse heightened when she and Nepi went to the theatre. The booking office seemed unapproachable. Nepi somehow managed to scramble up to the window, only to be told that there were no more two-

rupee seats available. Neela felt rather frantic, but there was nothing to be done. James and Harold, their guests, were waiting beside her. Without a word, she took out another five-rupee note and gave it to Nepi.

Three-rupee seats, of course, were better, and nearer the stage, and luckily they got seats near the centre. Neela took her seat between the two foreigners, and felt ill at ease.

'Aren't you well, Miss Sen?' James asked her.

She started. She realised she was being silly, took herself firmly in hand, and smiled, 'I'm all right, thanks.'

'But you look as if you aren't well at all'.

'You see', Neela smiled again, 'Life for our people is so usually agonising that we don't like tragedies. I was only thinking of this play's tragic ending'.

The curtain now lifted off the stage, and Nepi pulled Neela by the hand and said, 'I say, that's Kanoo-da, there!'

The president of the meeting and distinguished invitees sat on the lit-up stage. Actors and actresses would be congratulated on their performance, the dramatist would also be given something special. Kanai was sitting among the group of invitees.

For a moment Neela felt all trace of melancholy leaving her completely. But it was only for a moment. For the next moment she plunged into an even deeper gloom.

She was surprised to see Kanai there, to begin with. How could he become overnight a distinguished personage? Was that the reason why he did not have the time or the desire to see her the day before? And what was the special distinction he had acquired so quickly? He had told her he was going into business. Perhaps in a day he had tasted the passions of money-making. After all, it was in his blood. Perhaps the mentality of the prosperous, so long

slumbering in Kanai, had emerged strongly, and with the help of his aristocratic friends and relations he had got an invitation to the function on the stage. It was not such a difficult thing to do after all, especially if one had money.

Neela's lips seemed on their own to be curving up hard like a bow.

(XVI)

Kanai was there, not so much as a distinguished guest but as a newspaper representative. He went, as a matter of fact, as Bejoy's understudy.

From the day before, from Saturday that is to say, he had joined the newspaper on which Bejoy worked—a large and well-known establishment. It published two dailies, one in Bengali and the other in English, as well as a weekly and a monthly. Kanai had got a job as one of the 'night editors' of the Bengali daily *Freedom*. From ten o'clock at night to four in the morning were his hours of work.

'Night work is difficult, Kanoo', Bejoy had said, 'you have to turn night into day and day into night, and there'll be nothing to lighten your pains, neither the joys of love nor the sweet sorrows of separation!'

Kanai had smiled at Bejoy's accustomed pleasantries. 'I expect, Bejoy-da, the night-shifts in factories work with quite a crowd of unfortunates who are neither lovers nor delight in the woes of separation!'

'No, you're wrong', Bejoy rejoined, 'Ninetynine per cent of them are married. You better get married quick; then you would keep awake, thinking of a sweet face, and never once drop off into sleep.'

Kanai joined work on Saturday. He had decided not to meet Neela, not to link up her life with the complications

of his own. Besides, Bejoy took him along to the office at about the same time as he had arranged to meet Neela. He was strongly recommended by Bejoy, who produced also an article which Kanai had written that very morning. The shock which contact with Amal the capitalist had given him made him write an angry but attractive little essay on the subtle self-seeking which capitalist philanthropy fairly successfully hides. His would-be employers were satisfied that he could write, and took him on.

It was with real pleasure that Kanai envisaged his work as a journalist. And as was his wont, he gave free rein to his imagination. He would work hard and conscientiously, would develop his powers till they would really be of extraordinary worth. The paper would grow into a great power for good, and one day Kanai himself would be its chief editor. He would preach in its columns new ideals, explain new schemes of society. He would point out to his people the worthier patriots who should be the country's chosen leaders. And of course the politicians with their own axes to grind would send him tempting offers, try to lure him into their service, but he would refuse, sternly refuse their advances and expose them. And he would expose and condemn the minutest acts of injustice perpetrated by Government, he would never flinch and his rapid thrusts would be acclaimed. He would be ready and willing to accept every discomfort as the price of his courage, he would perhaps be sent to jail as so many of the country's editor-patriots had been before him. And after his term in jail was over, he would return triumphant. Perhaps then, he imagined rather irrelevantly, there would be Neela at the Jail gate, waiting eagerly to receive him . . . Or would she?

Bejoy took him along to work the first time. There

were five people then working in the editorial office, Kanai's colleagues. The night editor, Gunada Babu, was not only the officer in charge, he was quite obviously the heart and soul of a rather jolly company. He was the only comparatively elderly person there, for he was about Bejoy's age and at one time his co-worker in politics. 'Here you are', Bejoy introduced Kanai to Gunada Babu, 'You induct this lad into your circle, Gunada'.

'Circle?' Gunada looked up, 'Why call us a circle, Bejoy? We're a pack, a horde—or whatever you care to name it. We've to be quadrupeds down here, for we sleep on our legs.'

I've warned the young fellow about that', Bejoy laughed, 'but he's very obstinate, he wouldn't get married. So it's for you now to change this biped into a quadruped'.

'I'm not much good at that job', Gunada said, 'My inefficiency in that line has been proved—absolutely Q.E.D.-ed. Look at those two colts over there. They aren't quadrupeds yet, but I've made them walk on all fours and carry on somehow'. Everybody joined in the laughter this conversation raised.

Kanai quickly got to like his new life. It was rather a jolly group. Gunada's pleasantries sometimes bordered on coarseness, but they never hurt and had grown almost to be like dope which the night workers had just got used to. When Gunada went grave, everybody felt sleepy, yawned, ominously stretched their limbs. Kanai was trying to work as quickly as he could, he was trying to overcome the shyness congenital to him, but it was not long before Gunada made him feel quite intimate.

'So you aren't married? That's what Bejoy told me, didn't he?' Gunada asked.

Kanai only smiled in reply.

'Well, then, in that case, haven't you ever been in love? Tell me the truth, brother'.

'No.'

'You must be a most unfortunate creature'. He said it in a tone of voice that made Kanai laugh. 'Shame on you, Kanai! Shame on you! What the hell did you wander about in the University precincts for? These are days of progress, women's emancipation, co-education and so on and so forth, and you . . .' He made a sound of mock derision, looked at his other colleagues and added, 'Now listen, this is exactly what I mean by a mountain in labour producing a mouse. You see, out of these four, two are married. One is just head over heels, and the other's got a headache, and what a heartache! Poor me, I have to spout pleasantries all night to keep up their love-lorn spirit—it's just as if I'm a sort of postman, doling out love-letters! They feel so sleepy otherwise, but you—don't you lend your ear to my chatter!'

From time to time cups of tea were served in that room. Gunada sported a cheroot, which with *biris* and cigarettes smoked by others emitted a miscellaneous mist which seemed to hover permanently in the room. Telegrams sent by news agencies—Reuters, A.P., U.P.—were promptly translated into Bengali and sent to the press. Gunada passed every translation with a quick glance. He liked Kanai's work and told him so.

Kanai felt quite bucked to hear his translations praised. He smiled to himself and went on working. "Air attack on Cologne"—"Heavy bombers on France and the Low countries"—It was news of the world.

In between bouts of heavy work, there were bouts, equally sturdy, of discussion—especially on the war situa-

tion. Would the Russians win the Stalingrad battle? Weren't the Germans invincible?

Kanai would join in such discussion. 'The Russians aren't a mercenary army', he said once, 'They're fighting for their own soil, their own social system. And think of the way they organise their fighting. "Whoever can lift a rifle, should have one"—wasn't that what Voroshilov said the other day?'

Gunada would not usually take part in such bouts. When words were bandied about and excitement in the air, he would stop the fray. 'Look here, chaps, that won't do, just won't do. You've seen the draught-animals pulling carts loaded with sugar, but they never taste it, do they? You translate war news for the paper, it's not for you to discuss war strategy and such high-and-mighty things. You better cry halt'.

He would add, in his usual manner, 'You're making me desperate. My nagging wife drives me out of the house during day—I go and take shelter in the queue before the 'control' shops, I take the last place! And at night you start this wrangling. Ugh! You'll make me give up this job!'

As a matter of fact, Gunada did not like the usual trend of the discussions. It was not that he did not wish well to Russia, the socialist country, but the load of India's woes lay heavy on his heart, the humiliation of India's servitude was so excruciating that he could not rejoice over the Soviets' successes.

Suddenly, he said to Kanai, 'Look here, my dear fellow, I know Bejoy too well, we've worked together once. You are his disciple, and I want to tell you one thing. I wish with all my heart that Russia wins. But when I try to dance in joy at Soviet victories, the chains on my hands and



feet clang so that they hurt. You seem somehow to be able to forget that hurt, but I don't know your formula, I can't'. He sounded strangely moved, and Kanai was astonished to see him in that mood. Kanai seemed to want to say something, but Gunada stopped him. 'No, Kanai, not tonight. I'll listen to your arguments another time. Don't think I don't understand them, but they don't stir my emotions. I don't blame you, but I can't quite go your way'.

His first night work as journalist was to Kanai a really pleasant experience.

Kanai was having his article printed in Monday's issue of their paper. It was the one which Bejoy had shown the authorities to prove Kanai's flair for writing. On Sunday, therefore, Kanai went to the office early in the afternoon to correct the proofs. Most of the employees had a day off, and the office, usually so busy, looked deserted.

In the article he had described the scene he had noticed at Amal's workshop, and compared the situation with what prevailed during the early stages of the industrial Revolution in England. The economic transformation which had been so long impeded by a foreign bureaucracy, was happening in India at a fast tempo under the stress of war conditions. Homeless men and women marched on the streets, their meagre belongings bound in miserable packages which they carried on the head. A factory proprietor accosted them on the way, gave them a few beggarly rupees, promised wages and shelter, and bagged them as his work-slaves. In the factory were the Manager, Supervisors, foremen to extort every ounce of their labour. They could not run away, for there were armed sentries at the gate. The homeless wretches would be in a kind of

concentration camp, working at unwonted jobs, aching to run out into the open country, shedding tears of misery and despair, praying vainly to their God.

As he wrote and recalled the pretty young girl whom Amal had noticed avidly in that haggard crowd, he shuddered. He thought immediately also of Geeta. At least Geeta was safe, out of Amal's clutches, but that other girl must now be a prisoner in Amal's workshop.

Kanai had referred to comparable conditions in Nineteenth-century England and had quoted: "Terrible cruelty characterised much of the development of industrial capitalism, both on the Continent and in England. The birth of modern industry is heralded by a great slaughter of the innocents."

Recruits were collected from cottages and sent in batches to factories and workshops. Not so long ago, in India, coolies were transported to tea plantations against their will; they were hoodwinked into making contracts they did not understand, and the woes of the plantation-workers were common knowledge in our country. Similar oppression had been practised in those days in England and in Europe:

"As Lancashire was thinly populated and a great number of hands were suddenly wanted, thousands of hapless creatures were sent down to the north from London, Birmingham and other towns."

He had further discussed the steep rise in prices, the enormous influx of money to factories busy on war-production, and the sheer need which were driving people into the newfangled workshops.

The telephone rang. It was Bejoy asking the editor in charge of the economic and financial section of the paper

if he could spare anybody in his department and send him up to the Chief Editor's room where he was waiting.

'There isn't anybody here except the gentleman who has joined only yesterday—but Kanai-Babu will have to be on night duty . . . Oh, I see, you know him . . . all right, he will be coming along in a minute.'

Putting down the receiver, he said to Kanai, 'I didn't know you were a relation of Bejoy-babu's.'

'No', Kanai answered, 'he's not a relation, but, he's a lot more than that, he's more than a brother to me'.

'There's Bejoy-babu's influence, clear enough, in your article'.

Kanai said nothing in reply. 'Bejoy-Babu wishes to see you', he was told. 'You will please go upstairs to his room when you've done the proofs. You'll have to hurry.'

In a few minutes, Kanai was in Bejoy's room. He had no idea why he had been called. 'Ah', said Bejoy, 'Kanai-chandra will get up tomorrow morning and find himself famous. And yes, you better get up an English version of your article. It's been a good piece of work and I can put it in an English daily. You'll get a little cash, too, into the bargain.'

'But', Kanai asked, 'would one paper publish the translation of what had already appeared somewhere else?'

'You're a kid', Bejoy laughed, 'who tells you it would go in as translation? That reminds me. I must teach you something of the journalist's tactics. Well, the first thing is to learn to use one set of facts for five different purposes—I'll teach you the tricks of the trade in three days' time. The second thing is to be able to plagiarise so cleverly that even the fellow you're plagiarising wouldn't know and would even applaud your work. And the third thing is that when you write a rejoinder, shout down your opponent,

use choice invectives and you'll be appreciated. And yes, when you write serious articles in Bengali, use a few jaw-breaking adjectives—you know the kind of things I mean—the Time-spirit, the Dance of Death, Tongues of Flame, and all that sort of rot, you know.'

Kanai laughed. 'But why have you called me up?'

'Ah, of course, I was forgetting. Yes, you do one thing—it's an odd job. You go and see a play tonight'.

'What? A play?' Kanai was taken aback.

'Yes, yes, my lad. There's going to be the hundredth performance of 'Conflict' tonight. The dramatist is a friend of mine and has sent me a card. I haven't the time, but you can go'.

'But you know, Bejoy-da, I don't care for this sort of thing. Besides, you've been invited because you are a friend of the writer.'

'Rot', Bejoy spoke sharply, 'He's a friend, of course, but that's not the reason why he has asked me. I'm sure he has not asked many others who are his really intimate friends. What he is after is a review of the play in our paper, and that's all there's to it, really. You'll go as our reporter, for there's no one else here to-night'.

Kanai took the card without another word.

'The show's at six', Bejoy said, 'you better have something to eat'. And he rang for some tea and toast.

Kanai had no special love for the theatre and the cinema. He had seen plays when he was young and his father had still some money left. Since then, he had learnt to be indifferent to such things. Besides, it was excruciating for a man, with the kind of taste in literature that he had developed, to go and see a play or a picture—they were so bad, almost invariably. On top of all this, there was so much misery and destitution in the country that the very

sight of the crowded show-houses revolted his soul. Every time he saw the crowd before a cinema, he would recall life in the *bustee* he knew so well. It pained him deeply to see this horrid contrast—unimaginable poverty, humanity oppressed, life drying up in want and misery at one end, and at the other, men wallowing in the poison ponds of luxury. They were all dying, all the same—dying in laughter or in tears.

But that evening he had to go to the play, it was part of his work at the office.

It was quite a gala day for the theatre. As you entered the porch, you heard strains of music ; for overhead there was a *Nahabat*. Deep red velvet curtains hung on the entrance doors. On two sides of the entrance were two water-vessels, for luck—complete with cocoanut and mango bough. The pillars in the front corridor were covered over with coloured cloth. Net curtains hung on the auditorium entrances. There was a crowd at the box office—a crowd of welldressed men and women, a scene of unworried luxury.

Kanai represented an important paper and his seat was one of the best. He looked in at the restaurant attached to the theatre ; it was overcrowded, the waiters moved round with amazing agility. Some kept coming out into the lobby with enormous trays on which were earthen cups, cakes, biscuits and a large kettle full of already prepared tea. 'Tea!' 'Cakes!' 'Biscuits!' 'Potato chips!' 'Salted Almonds!' There was quite an uproar.

Inside the auditorium also, the walls were especially decorated, coloured cloths hung everywhere, interspersed with rings of flowers. An enormous pile of many-coloured flowers lay ahead of the foot-lights.

'Are you, sir, representing 'Freedom?' Kanai was

asked. And when he said, 'Yes', he was politely requested to step up to the platform. 'You'll give us a good column, wouldn't you, sir?' Kanai smiled as he went up to the stage. Distinguished guests were there already, and he took his seat among them. In a moment the curtain rose. The auditorium was filled to overflowing. The bright stage lights projected towards the more highly priced seats nearer the stage. Suddenly he noticed two Europeans in military uniform. He was glad. They wanted to learn more about India, he thought. But, who was it sitting next to them? Was it Nepi? Yes, it was, and then there was—could it be Neela? Of course, it was Neela!

He saw Neela clearly enough, and she also was looking at him. And just then one of the Europeans bent across and said something to . . . yes, it was Neela he was speaking to, for she was answering his question, obviously. Kanai's brow puckered up. So Neela had come to the theatre with those foreign soldiers! He looked away.

### (XVII)

The president was a wellknown scholar and patriot. He congratulated the dramatist and all others who had been responsible for the success of the play, and said in his peroration: "A terrible disaster impends to-day. It has begun to be visible in Bengal also. It isn't only that life has become a precarious proposition, whatever comes under the label of culture is badly menaced, and correspondingly the responsibility of the writer and the artist has multiplied a hundredfold. The world looks to the writer and the artist for inspiration ; literature and the drama, in particular, must therefore play a new and heightened role. I must confess I am not very optimistic about the present trends

in the Bengali stage, but I must not digress into a discussion of that question. All I wish to say tonight is in the nature of an appeal to our writers and artists, an appeal to them to beware of the storm and stress around us but remember always that it is worse before it is better and to create hymns of beauty in honor of the free and strong humanity which will emerge out of the travails of today." His speech was listened to intently and enthusiastically applauded. The guests who had taken their seats on the stage moved towards the auditorium; the curtain came down. Kanai got up, along with the rest of them, but he was rather absent-minded. He was annoyed to see how the dramatist behaved in that crowd. The poor fellow seemed to have had no pride in himself and looked as if he was a child who had been rewarded with some toffee. He sat among the distinguished guests, of course, but he had the air of one who was not really cared for by the company. He was garlanded, too, but last of all—the director and the principal actor were honoured earlier. Apart from the president who made a short and sensible speech, the others simply ignored the writer of the play and unashamedly flattered the director and the principal actor. There was in particular a retired professor who had tried his hand at writing plays which just flopped and were forgotten, who beat everybody in this game of speech-making. Kanai was hurt, most of all, to see the pauperish manner in which the writer stretched his greedy hands to accept the present given him on the occasion. He recalled, involuntarily, a nursery rhyme: 'What ho! what joy! My nose is cut off, but I've got these nail-scissors instead!' Didn't the writer know, Kanai went on ruminating, that as playwright he was kinsman to Kalidasa and Shakespeare and Bernard Shaw? He recalled how poor relations behaved when they attended ceremonial

functions at the house of the Chakravartis' more prosperous acquaintances. There was little difference between their charity-boyish behaviour and that of the unfortunate playwright. In the dramatic festivals of our country, the dramatists were very secondary. And yet, only the other day, he was reading in a book on the European theatre: "If writers have still a great deal to learn from the theatre as regards technique, the dramatists are of greater importance than the actors and managers."

But blaming the dramatists of a hapless country was of little avail. Where was the sphere of thought and action where the country's future seemed at all brighter, more elevated and propitious? Kanai looked, involuntarily almost, in Neela's direction. Wasn't it a pity of pities that the country's womenfolk had no future? Wasn't even all hope of a nest of their own being obliterated—the nest where alone the future generations were to be born and brought up? And so, a dark Bengali girl, plunged in the gloom of a darkening future, sat beside foreign soldiers, imagining things, aching for the fulfilment of her heart's desire. He seemed to be losing all respect for Neela. Was she really such a vapid person? Did she imagine that, when the war ended, that white man over there would lead her gently by the arm to his own home-country, gain her entry into "white" society? A bitter mocking smile broke on his lips as he thought of it.

Meanwhile the curtain had gone up again and the play had begun. There was complete quiet in the auditorium, punctuated by occasional applause. Everybody seemed to be enjoying the play, but Kanai hardly gave his mind to it, the same bitter reflection circled in his brain.

The first act was soon over; the spectators talked animatedly, tea and sundries were being hawked about.



Kanai looked in amazement at a boy with a tray on his hand, shouting 'Hot Tea!' 'Chops and Cutlets!' 'Potatoo Chips!' It was Hiren, Geeta's brother, now working obviously in a tea-shop.

'Kanoo-da!' some one called him from a corner.

Kanai looked round and saw Nepi. As their eyes met, Nepi smiled happily and said, 'We also have come, Kanoo-da.'

'Oh yes, I've seen you all. But how did you get hold of those tommies there?'

There was something in Kanai's voice which Nepi did not like. 'They're not the usual kind of tommies, Kanoo-da', he protested, 'they were students at Oxford and don't at all like being called tommies. Real gentlemen they are.'

'I see. So that's how, is it?' Kanai said with a sting.

'Why not come along and meet them?' Nepi pleaded.

'No, thank you. I'm not so keen.'

Nepi felt quite hurt; the tone of distant indifference in Kanai's voice had not escaped him, he got the impression that Kanai wanted to keep him at arms' length. Still he persisted, 'The play's excellent, isn't it?'

'Who knows?' Kanai answered, mysteriously.

It was not an answer to his query, really. It was as good as an intimation that Kanai did not wish to prolong the conversation. Nepi felt the going to be a little too much and without another word walked back to his seat. Kanai looked round in search of Hiren.

'What did your "hero" tell you?' Neela asked with a smile, as Nepi got back to his seat.

Nepi did not reply. The word "hero", which Neela had used in her Bengali drew the foreigner's attention, and Harold leaned forward and said, 'The hero of the play is doing his part very well indeed, isn't he?'

'Yes', Neela smiled, 'he's a well-known actor. But I wasn't referring to him. I was referring to Nripen's "Hero". Didn't you see my brother talking to someone over there. That was his "hero".' She smiled again.

'He's a distinguished person, I expect'.

'You'll meet him sometime and will get some idea of a new young race emerging among us'.

'With great pleasure, Miss Sen'.

Nepi put his hand on his sister's, pressed it and said 'Ugh-um'. The Bengali *Na* was so nearly the same as 'No', that he checked himself pronouncing it, so that the foreigners, might not understand.

The curtain was rising again. Neela was surprised at her brother's manner but she had understood that Nepi hesitated even to say in Bengali what he had to say before the foreigners. She turned to watch the play, but she could no longer concentrate, a question pricked her throughout: what on earth had Kanai told Nepi?

In an interval between scenes, Nepi said in a hushed voice: 'Kanai-da called these men tommies'.

Neela only puckered her brow.

'You must not introduce them to him', Nepi said again. 'No'.

'I had suggested it, you know, but Kanai-da refused'.

'I see', Neela got a shock, discovering this impolite trait in Kanai. He should at least have come up to her and said 'How-d'you-do?' It was the kind of impoliteness one expected from insolent people with little breeding. Where and why had Kanai learnt to behave in that fashion?

When the curtain fell on the second act, she felt like going up to where Kanai had his seat and quietly to tell him a few home truths. It was just then, however, that Kanai left the auditorium.

'There's Kanoo-da, going out', Nepi said.

Neela did not speak. In an effort to ignore the incident, she sat there, obviously absent-minded. . . . It was Nepi who continued the conversation: 'Kanoo-da didn't like the play. I said it was good and asked him what he thought, but he smiled in a queer way and said he didn't know.'

Neela felt her blood boiling. What made Kanai treat Nepi in such supercilious fashion? She thought for a few moments and then got up. 'You'll please excuse me. I'll be back in five minutes'. She smiled an apology to her two guests and hurried to the corridor.

Kanai was then standing at the entrance to the restaurant attached to the theatre, like one who was waiting for a friend to come out. And it was exactly then that a boy employed there came from the hall into the restaurant. 'Five cutlets and four chops—hurry!' he said. Intent on his job, Hiren had not even noticed Kanai.

Kanai pulled him sharply and called, 'Hiren!'

He turned round, saw who it was, looked flabbergasted for a moment, then dropped the tray and in double-quick fashion took out a pocket-knife and jumped on towards Kanai.

The whole thing happened in an instant. Neela was awe-struck, she could not shout a syllable. The others in the corridor rushed towards the culprit. Kanai tried to hold him by the hand and got slightly hurt on the left wrist. 'Hiren! Listen, please', he pleaded still.

The little miscreant did not listen at all, he gave Kanai a heavy jerk and jumped away, to break into a smart run far out of the theatre precincts. Kanai followed him still; 'Hiren! Hiren!' he shouted.

'Don't try to follow him! Don't try!' the others were saying.

'Kanai-Babu! Kanai Babu!', Neela, finding her voice at last was now calling out.

Nepi had also come out by this time and he also shouted, 'Kanoo-da!'

It was just then that the air raid siren sounded. The soul of the city, shrunken, it seemed, in fear, wailed out a plaintive elongated note which filled suddenly the mystery-laden atmosphere of the moonlit winter night.

Kanai looked up incredulously and stopped himself running out. Nepi went up, took him by the arm and said, 'You can't go now, please come inside.'

It was the first real earnest of death dropping from the air on Calcutta. Kanai felt a queer sensation of excitement. 'It's the siren, isn't it, Nepi?' he asked, rather dazed. It was quite a superfluous question, for everybody had heard the warning clearly enough.

'Yes, Kanoo-da, Let's go inside'.

'Yes, let's.'

'Who was that lad, Kanoo-da?'

'Oh, that was Geeta's brother. You've seen Geeta, haven't you?'

Nepi had met her, and had heard vaguely of some grave danger out of which Kanai had rescued her.

When Kanai came inside, Neela took his hand without any hesitation and asked, 'Does the wound hurt very much?'

Kanai spread out his hand, saw the knife-mark for the first time himself, and answered with a smile, 'No, not much'.

Behind them was a crowd, all speaking in hushed and

worried tones. The siren's wail was reaching its last evil notes.

James and Harold also had come out of the auditorium along with some other spectators. Their white faces had turned purple in excitement.

There were some chairs in the lobby and they requested Neela to take her seat. 'Yes, do take your seat', Kanai also put in.

'But you should have the wound dressed', Neela said anxiously.

'It's nothing much, Miss Sen', Kanai rejoined, 'and there's a much bigger danger hovering overhead. Don't please worry about iodine and such other stuff for my sake. There's no need for worry, really.'

All else was being overshadowed by the anxiety and fear which the air raid warning had caused. Some ladies were seated on a bench nearby ; one of them was shivering ; a little girl sat mute and pale, like an earthen doll ; an elderly lady was perhaps silently saying her prayers. A girl sat in the corner, with a garland and a brand new *shawl* on her lap. The shawl had been presented earlier in the evening to the writer of the play ; possibly the girl was some relation of his. The men who had come out looked worried. Not all had left the auditorium, however, and the play had not been stopped.

Suddenly Neela took Nepi aside and asked quietly, 'Who is that boy, d'you know? Kanai-Babu seems to know him well.'

'Oh, that's Geeta's brother.'

'Geeta's brother? But who's Geeta?'

'I see. You don't know Geeta? She is staying at Bejoy-da's place. It seems she was in some kind of trouble and Kanai-da rescued her.'

'Oh, he rescued her? And she's now at Bejoy-da's?'

'Yes. Kanai-da also is staying with Bejoy-da now. He's broken off with his family.'

'Broken off?'

'Yes, he has broken all ties with the family.'

'For that girl's sake, I expect?'

Nepi looked up at his sister's face. 'I don't know about that', he said. After a while he added, 'Are you feeling nervous?'

Neela lifted her eyebrows and answered in a sudden, sharp tone of voice that was audible to many people: 'No, of course not. Why should I be nervous?'

It was not long before the play was over and the spectators filed out into the lobby and there was quite a congestion there.

Kanai stood very near the entrance. A stretch of the road could be seen from inside. A bright moon shone, unwanted, on the deserted street. There was a slight mist in the air, but the moonlight pored clearly through it. Rows of rickshaws, taxis, private cars, hackney carriages stood alongside the pavements, their lights all out, looking like apparitions.

A police lorry seemed to thunder through in that stillness.

Two ladies, accompanied by a gentleman, came out of the auditorium. 'I expect we can rush home, we have our own car.'

Somebody in authority answered, 'Please don't try. I don't think they'll let you. . . .'

Inspite of the warning, a small group went out. They wanted to thread their way home through stealthy lanes and by-lanes. They had not gone far when A.R.P. whistles

sounded, and Khaki-clad, iron-helmeted A.R.P. officials barred their way.

Kanai was thinking, thinking hard. He looked at James and Harold and thought all the more. Perhaps tonight, he said to himself, Jap bombers had appeared on their ferocious nightly errand in Bengal's moonlit sky. And the fighter planes that would chase them and give them battle were manned by people who belonged to the race of the Jameses and Harolds. The men of this unfortunate land had not even the right to defend their own soil. . . . And yet, it stood to reason—as clear as day—that the millions of India's youth, healthy, strong and brainy, did really have the right, the unchallengeable right, to defend their own dear, vast country, the home of four hundred million souls! Kanai was now a newspaperman, and he recalled parts of a Reuter message he transcribed only the other day. It spoke of people taking shelter of an air raid night in a London tube-station, and reported what an old lady was saying: "This night our lads are giving the Nazis a hot chase."

He remembered a simple old Englishwoman's pride and sighed for himself and his country. If all was well, he would not be messing about as a newspaperman, he would don fighter's clothing, like James and Harold over there. Perhaps on his shoulder would have been embossed the emblem of the fighting Air Force. Perhaps also, at such an hour, his face, like theirs, would have flushed with controlled excitement. Neela would have seen him like that and wondered. . . . And he would have smiled at her, pressed her hand warmly and said, 'Well, I must be off now'. On her lips would quiver the unspoken question, 'Must you? But where to?' And he would have answered, 'To give them a hot chase'. Yes, to give them, indeed, a hot chase,

for if they could not be punished on this side of the frontier, he would rush across, changing planes at the aerodromes on the frontier, rush over enemy territory and teach the fascists a lesson. . . .

Neela's face would have lit up, like the bluish little stars of the night, and in her eyes would gather beads of tears. . . .

A few feet away. Neela asked her brother another sudden question: 'Have you seen Geeta, Nepi?'

Nepi had felt rather nervous to hear her sister speak so sharply a little earlier. It was only rarely that she spoke in that way. But when she did, everyone in the house got worried. For Neela would then look as if she was quite another person, her dark face would shine, as it were, like a lightning streak. Nepi had not quite got over his agitation and said timidly, 'Yes, *Didi*; she's a very nice girl, indeed'.

Neela looked hard at him for a moment and then looked away. A bitter smile formed itself on her lips. So it was a very nice girl, quiet and obedient, whom Kanai had rescued, and even left his home on her account! And the rescued girl's brother hurls a knife at the rescuer! Quite a drama, she mused.

'What was her trouble, Nepi, d'you know?' she asked after a while.

Nepi did some quick thinking. 'I don't know for sure, but I guess her parents wanted to marry her off to some old imbecile—'

'Oh, they were trying to get her married?' Neela said tauntingly. So Kanai, she thought sardonically, was now the hero of a great Bengali romance—rescuing girls being married off against their will . . . .



Her musing were interrupted by the sound of explosives from somewhere in the distance. In a moment all the conversation, the expert prognostications of what was to happen, the smiles and pleasantries, were hushed. Neela also, as it were, woke up in excitement. Nepi looked at her, without a word. James and Harold went nearer her, and when she looked questioningly at them James said, 'I expect that's the anti-aircraft barrage.'

After a few moment's lull, the crowd began clamouring again.

'Has the wolf jumped into the flock?' Someone facetiously asked.

'Must be. Can't you hear the noise?'

'Go on. Perhaps someone's hammering on the stage. Can this be the sound of bombing?'

Kanai stood quite still. He could not quite believe it was the sound of bombing. Of course, there had been the siren, and bombs could very well be dropping, but he could not quite connect that noise with the idea of terror which he associated in imagination with bombing raids. Wouldn't the earth shake for miles around when there was an explosion? But it did not where he stood. Hadn't he heard of a kind of tornado following an explosion and tearing down enormous mansions like a pack of cards? But there was no inkling of that at all. Everybody in the eager crowd was comparing notes, as it were, comparing their idea of a raid with what they were experiencing; many were pacing to and fro in their excitement, inspite of the congestion.

There were a few more reports of explosions somewhere. The crowd's anxiety multiplied, the more timid among them felt as if they were being slowly strangled.

The sound of A. R. P. whistles could be heard from time to time outside.

The tea stall was overcrowded, but hardly anybody spoke ; people ate without a word. 'What horrid food the fellow serves here', a patron said as he came out, 'he's the kind of person who should be bombed out'. The proprietor of the tea-stall was the happiest of all, for he had never had such custom before.

All of a sudden, a man was heard ejaculating, 'I must go, I *must*!' His friends were trying to prevent him, he was pretty nearly demented.

They could not stop him. He wrenched himself out of everybody's grip and rushed out. 'My child is ill. He must be so frightened . . . ' he shouted as he ran into the street.

On the sky blazed rockets from time to time ; they shot up, burst and would then flare out.

'The air raid's still on', James commented.

Neela said nothing. She sat as if she was a sculptured cast of stone. Kanai walked up towards her and smiled softly, 'How're you feeling?'

She did not answer. Kanai said again, 'It's a new experience, anyhow'. She only gave a rather cynical smile.

. . . . The siren sounded again. This time it was a long drawn, out assurance that the danger had passed. 'All clear!' Enemy bombers that had scoured our skies, doling death out of its bowels, had been chased out. . . .

Kanai looked at his watch ; it was a quarter of an hour past midnight. The siren had first sounded at 10-17.

A fresh clamour rose again—a clamour of relief, of gladness. They were safe, all unhurt. They had survived the cruel attack of death's messengers from the air. The crowd poured into the street, like water gushing past a broken embankment.

Neela took Nepi's arm and got up.

'Thank Heavens!' James and Harold said at last, 'But we owe you such an apology, Miss Sen. It's been only for us that you've had to spend all this time anxiously away from your people.'

'Don't say that', Neela smiled palely, 'You were my guests. But I'm afraid I must be saying goodbye to you now'.

'But you'll let us see you home, wouldn't you?'

'Please don't worry. I wouldn't like you to take all that trouble. We live very near here—it's five or seven minutes' walk, and Nepi's here to look after me'. She spoke very politely, but there was something in her voice which made them feel she did not want their company any longer. They demurred no further and said good-bye.

Rickshaws, taxis, hackney carriages were all in great demand. Nobody haggled over the fare. 'Let's get a move on', they would say as they climbed in. . . .

Many went walking. The young children were being carried by the father, perhaps the mother also carried an infant. The older children walked, shivering in the cold.

The trams would be coming and many waited for them. Usually they would not run at such a late hour, but they had all been held up on the way and would now be returning to the depots.

Kanai had to report at his office. But he wanted to reach Neela and Nepi home before he went back to work. He had noticed that the two foreigners had left. He went up and said, 'Let me come with you part of the way'.

Neela turned round, and the mocking smile on her lips could be seen in the moonlight. She spoke sharply, with a suggestion of a bitter laugh in her voice: 'You needn't worry, Kanai-Babu. We're in no danger and need no rescuer. You better go where you have to'.

The tones of her voice seemed to crack like a cruel whip on Kanai's heart. A stern retort jumped to his tongue but he checked himself. He gave a smile and a nod. 'Alright, then, I'll be off'.

(XVIII)

Early next morning, December 21, Kanai returned from work. The siren had not sounded without reason the night before. Japanese bombers had actually appeared over the Calcutta area and dropped bombs in a suburb. A statement from military headquarters had been issued, and the Government's publicity department had sent copies of it to all the newspapers. Kanai himself had translated the communiqué.

Crowds had not yet emerged on the streets, the wheel of life had not begun to move in full vigour. There were few people about, except near the markets, in front of restaurants, at street corners. Little groups clustered there, as was usual every morning. But there was a difference. There seemed to be excitement in the air. The Calcutta area had had its first air raid.

Newsboys were bawling excitedly, 'Calcutta bombed!' 'Japanese bombers attack Calcutta!'

The communiqué did not mention the location which had been raided, neither could the newspapers. People on the streets reported with gusto the result of their researches on the location. The trams hummed with statements and counter-statements.

Some said it was a northern suburb while others mentioned the west, still others the south. One volubly knowledgeable person gave out impressive particulars. 'I know it for certain', he said in tones of authority, 'it's the

south-west. There's hardly a sign of life there now. Big craters are everywhere. They found the body of a *coolie*, chunks of his limbs just blown off, you know'.

Kanai smiled to himself. He knew what had happened, but could not divulge it. The fellow was right about the direction—it was actually a south-western suburb—but the rest of his story was sheer rumour-mongering.

Everybody in the tram listened eagerly to the story. 'They've started on a Sunday, and that's the day they always choose for attack, you know. So it's started now, and the siren will sound again, blast it. They might even come in the early morning. What they did in Burma, you remember?'

Kanai felt like putting in a word of dissent. But he checked himself. The tram reached just then the corner of Keshab Sen Street. It reminded him vividly of Neela and the scenes at the theatre the night before. Did Neela realise he was upset? But it was annoying—wasn't it?—that she went to the play with the two foreign soldiers. It hurt him to think of Neela as a frivolous young girl. Why must she go about in borrowed plumes? Could those foreigners be in love with Neela? It could only be a momentary infatuation, he felt sure; it could be no more serious than that. 'I'm in no danger', she had taunted him the night before. He smiled bitterly when he recalled the scene. She did not know, perhaps, but she was heading for trouble, he felt, and he did not like it. He got off the tram as it reached the Vivekananda Road crossing.

The crowds on the streets were thicker now. The atmosphere of excitement deepened, discussion of the raid brought out strange new facts. It seemed as if many were too eager for news of a real heavy raid.

Since the beginning of time men have resented whatever

was their present lot. But when that future materialises, the dreams do not come true. Men wish for a transformation of the social set-up, but it seems stronger than even the relentless movement of time. Kanai sighed and smiled too. Sukhamay Chakravarti's old mansion should have fallen down in ruins a long time ago, but it had weathered earthquakes, and only the other day it stood up to a cyclone with pathetic persistence. And yet the decree secured in Court by *Marwari* creditors would demolish what, it seemed, even time could not. Then the old mansion would be dismantled and a new one built in its stead, a transformation of Sukhamay's dilapidated house would come about that way.

The newsboys were doing a roaring trade. 'Bombs on Calcutta!' One of them pushed a copy of 'Freedom' under his nose. 'Buy a copy. 'Freedom' has such wonderful reports!'

Kanai laughed, 'Those who make the sweets don't eat them, do they?'

The newsboy looked in surprise. Kanai turned the corner and walked down the lane.

It was his turn now to be surprised when he reached Bejoy's place where he was putting up. Bejoy lay stretched on a comfortable deck-chair and on a raised wooden platform beside him sat Neela. One of her hands rested on the handle of a suit-case. It looked as if she had just arrived there with the suit-case. In one corner of the platform Nepi sat quietly. There were two or three cups on a rickety teapoy and Geeta was pouring out the tea.

'Ah! here you are', Bejoy hailed him, 'What's your news now? So at last the wolf has come, has he?'

'But surely', Kanai smiled, 'I haven't been the shepherd in the story raising false alarms and then caught napping.'

'No, you haven't . . . Now, sit down and have a cup of

tea'. He turned towards Geeta and said, 'You give him a cup. The poor chap had to sit up and worry out the long night, while we slept soundly enough after the raids. I expect you couldn't sleep a wink last night, could you, Kanoo?'

'No'.

'Just as I thought. Now you drink your tea and rescue our good Nepi here'.

'But what on earth is the matter?'

'Ah, don't you know? He aches for serving the people and will be off in a little while to where they dropped bombs last night. He wants you to come with him, has been waiting for you as a matter of fact.' Bejoy spoke in a mock-ironic vein, but with great good humour and the kindness which they all understood.

Suddenly Neela got up, suit-case in hand. 'I'll be off now, Bejoy-da', she said.

'Where to and why?' Bejoy asked.

'I'll see if I can put up in an hotel'.

'Oh, I see. But the door of my hotel are open enough, aren't they? Why worry yourself unnecessarily?'

'No, it isn't that'.

'That won't do, child', Bejoy protested, 'You better rest for a while and have some tea. You can easily attend your office to-day from here. And if when you come back you don't find my hotel functioning efficiently, well, you can go to whichever hotel you choose. I'll be off now and in an hour will fix up a real good place. I have no less than three unsolicited customers. Yes, I must start this hotel—the "tenants' camp" I'll call it. You wait and see'.

'All right', Neela laughed, 'you start your hotel first and I'll come on the opening day. But now I must leave'. She hurried out of the room.

'But I say! Neela!' Bejoy got up from his chair.

Kanai stared in astonishment, but it was not proper, he felt, for him to ask any questions. Bejoy had gone out of the room, following Neela. Kanai looked at Nepi who smiled weakly and said, '*Didi* (elder sister) has left home'.

'Left home?' Kanai repeated.

'Father made a row—', Nepi did not complete the sentence. Kanai did not say a word.

Nepi changed the topic. 'I hear they've bombed *bustees* in Radhikapore. We ought to be there, Kanoo-da'.

Kanai was not listening. He was thinking of Neela. Why had she left home? What was the row with her father about? Perhaps—why perhaps, that must be it. He must have noticed his daughter making friends with those foreigners, and taken her to task about it. But of course, Neela was a modern girl, she earned her own living and could look after herself. Naturally she did not like it and broke with her father. So that was that, he mused, and a smile crept up his lips.

What Kanai had guessed was, indeed, the truth.

Devaprasad, Neela's father, had a most anxious time when the alert was on. All the time he had paced up and down his room. He had thought even of rushing to the theatre to find out how she was. Neela, of course, had told her father where she was going. But she had said nothing about James and Harold. She knew the limits of her father's liberalism. She knew very well that he would never tolerate the idea of her asking two foreign soldiers to a theatre. Racked by anxiety, he had hastened to the theatre as soon as the 'All clear' sounded: It was a short distance, and looking in the crowd he noticed suddenly his daughter saying goodbye to two white strangers. He was astounded.



He had kept himself in the background and followed his children home. They met at the doorstep. 'You here, dad?' Neela had asked in surprise.

He had stared straight into Neela's face.

There was no reason for Neela to feel uneasy before her father, she had done no wrong and felt she had nothing to hide. 'Did you also go out somewhere, father, and get caught during the alert?'

Devaprasad said nothing but gave a loud knock at the door.

It was then that Neela could sense the unspoken anger in her father's face. Nepi had felt it even more keenly, for he was used much more to Devaprasad's indignation. He pressed Neela's hand to warn her of the trouble that was brewing. But she hardly understood, she resented her father's sullen mood for no reason that she could fathom. Her mother opened the door at that moment. 'Thank goodness you've come!', she said, 'but what a precious girl you are, what a precious child!'

Neela, already in a temper, got still more annoyed. 'But mother, what have I done?'

'What have you done? It's past midnight now, and you, a girl in the full bloom of youth, out at this hour—'

'But surely, mother', Neela interrupted, 'I couldn't know—could I? that there'd be an air raid warning. If it wasn't for that, I would have been home by ten. I've done nothing wrong.' She ended up in an impatient tone of voice.

It was then that Devaprasad who had so long kept himself in leash burst out explosively. 'So you've done nothing wrong?' he almost shouted.

Neela was flabbergasted. Never before in her life had she seen her father in that temper.

'Can you place your hand on your heart and say you've done nothing wrong?' he demanded.

She was too touchy to say a word, though she ached to repeat she had done no wrong. Her lips trembled, she could not pronounce a monosyllabic 'No'.

'Who were those two Europeans? They were soldiers, obviously enough. But how did you get to know them? In the theatre—?' Devaprasad stopped half-way, unable in his anguish to complete his indictment.

Neela felt as if the world was whirling around her ears. What an ugly suggestion lurked repulsively behind her father's angry ejaculations?

'These tommies! Dissolute barbarians!'

'No, father, you're wrong. They aren't what you call tommies. They were students at Oxford and have come here to fight—for their ideals'. Neela protested firmly.

'To hell with your Oxford! I don't care a rap. They are foreigners. How d'you get to know them?'

Neela looked straight at her father's face. 'They are our friends', she said in quite tones. 'We had asked them to the play, so that they could see what our theatre was like'.

This time Devaprasad was astounded. So that was what his Neela, his infinitely beloved little child, had turned out to be! Asking foreigners to a play! How all his dreams about her were shattered! His whole heart shuddered to think what things were coming to.

Neela's mother was so long just listening. It was to her a complete surprise. But when she heard of her daughter's friendship with foreigners she could not contain herself. 'What a horrible shame! Was this what the fates had in store for us?' She bemoaned.

'You're my father,' Neela said in an ominously quiet voice, 'but you have hurled at me the cruellest humiliation'.

Her father did not seem to hear. 'Tomorrow you'll send in your resignation', he demanded.

'Resignation? What on earth for?'

'I'm telling you. That ought to be enough. I'll do the duty I owe you, at once. I'll get you married.'

'No, you won't', Neela said firmly.

'No?' Devaprasad pretty nearly screeched.

'No', she repeated and moved towards the door.

'Neela!' her mother shouted in fear of what was happening.

'I'm leaving, mother. After all this, I can't live with you'.

Devaprasad now spoke, 'I do not wish you to go. But if you insist, well, don't go tonight. Do what you like tomorrow'.

Neela thought for a few moments and turned back.

'Nepi!' Devaprasad called out. Nobody answered. Nepi had not even come inside. His father went out to see if he was there, but there was no sign of him. As usual, he had gone away, silently, when nobody noticed.

All that night Neela could not close her eyes. She had paced up and down her room, tirelessly. Devaprasad also had not slept. Neela's mother had cried all night, cried to herself in the dark.

At dawn Neela got up, took a few things to wear in a small suit-case and left the house. She thought of Bejoy's place as a likely shelter when she was wandering where to go. Nepi must have gone there too, she felt. But would it be right for her to go, she argued, when that girl Geeta whom Kanai had rescued from somewhere was also there? She thought hard and then decided to spend at least the forenoon at Bejoy's. She would ask his advice, and yes, she would have a look at Geeta, too.

On arrival at Bejoy's she told him the whole story.

'Goodness gracious, I do seem to be in luck', Bejoy laughed, 'If a few more of you run away from home at this rate, well, I can set myself up as a hotel keeper, in grand style'. . . .

He went on in his usual manner. 'So that's why I discovered our good Nepi sleeping out under the awning, all curled up in the cold. And when I asked him what was the matter, he told me he was going to help looking after people in the bombed area and had started too early, couldn't quite guess the time. And so he was waiting at my door and had gone to sleep while waiting! You prevaricator!' he teased Nepi who kept looking at the floor and smiling rather sheepishly.

'I say, Shasthi', Bejoy called the servant, 'get a seer of *Jilipi* fried hot, at once. It must be good. You better pay two annas extra, but not more, see?' Geeta entered the room then, and Neela who, seeing her, had guessed perfectly who she was, asked still, 'Who is this girl, Bejoy-da?'

'She's Geeta', Bejoy answered, 'You see we have a contract. Every time we meet she must smile.'

Geeta looked at Neela and smiled shyly. Neela smiled back a smile of compassion, almost of patronising contempt. 'So this is Geeta?'

'Yes', Bejoy answered and turning towards Geeta added, 'Let's have some tea, shall we? You know Nepi, of course; this is Neela, Neela Sen, Nepi's elder sister'.

Geeta bowed low and touched her feet. Neela was taken by surprise. 'Oh, I say!' she protested and drew her feet back.

Timidly smiling, Geeta had gone to the other room.

'She's a very good girl, a very, very good girl', Bejoy said.

'Who is she, Bejoy-da?' Neela asked.

'She's been in great trouble and Kanai has rescued her'.

'Rescued?'

'Yes, It's a pitiful story'.

Neela asked no further questions, for it was then that Kanai entered the scene.

Bejoy did not come back, neither did Neela. Kanai went out on the verandah but could see no signs of them. He felt quite annoyed with Neela. What was the point of her troubling Bejoy if she did not wish to stay there? . . . And hadn't she made her choice? Wasn't she gone on one of those foreigners and intent on winning him for life? Well, if she was, she should not have come to Bejoy's modest apartments. She should have gone straight to a first-class modern hotel. And like *Chitrangada* who, lacking beauty, had conquered *Arjuna's* heart by emerging in borrowed charm with flower-bespattered woodlands in spring setting it off, so she should have gone to some sumptuously furnished room in an hotel and received her friends in faultless attire and make-up.

'Kano-da?' Nepi called him.

Kanai turned round and saw Nepi in a corner of the room.

'Aren't you coming to Radhikapore? Couldn't you make the time, Kano-da?'

Nepi was a wonderful lad. Neela had gone, but he felt no anxiety on that score. He never felt it necessary to ask where she was going. It was a wonder how at that age he had shed so completely the many little ties that bind one to one's family and effaced himself so well in the passion for work. Like some fruit which goes through its normal cycle of ripening, which has its seed-time, luxuriates in the

leafy life of a spreading tree and then drops out of the pleasant fetters that twigs had formed, Nepi had left home and the family in quest of a life of freedom and grew in stature with every step he took. There was in his mind a sort of sheer non-attachment to what he had left but not a tinge of bitterness either. Kanai, on the other hand, had left home out of stinging disgust. There lay the difference between them.

'Kanoo-da!' Nepi called again.

He had kept awake nearly all the night before and his body ached for rest, but he could not resist Nepi's importunity. 'Yes, Nepi, of course I'll come with you'.

'Well, in that case, don't let's waste more time'.

'But let's wait for Bejoy-da and your sister coming back'.

'I don't know about that. Bejoy-da will do what he thinks fit. But we might be late for work over there, mightn't we?'

Kanai smiled a little and said 'All right. I shan't be five minutes. I'll have a quick bath'. He turned up shortly. 'Let's go, Nepi' he said.

This time Nepi smiled. 'Kanoo-da, we've to wait a little while. Geeta is getting some food for us'.

'I see. But wasn't the tea and the sweets enough for us?'

'Geeta's getting us the food we shall need at mid-day'.

Geeta's voice could be heard from the next room. 'I shan't be a minute, Kanoo-da. Food is nearly ready'.

Kanai began to think again of the poor girl. She seemed always to be moving about with an effort, with the load of the world's woes on her head. He had heard her trying vainly to stifle her sobs into her pillow; how she cried in the privacy of the night! Perhaps she could not

wipe off her mind the cruel memory of what she had suffered. Kanai thought of Amal whom he had seen in a different make-up, as a tirelessly active man, scrupulously polite, inclined even to be affectionate towards him. There was no mistaking the genuineness of all that, and yet how horrid he must have been, with his sensuality venting itself so terribly like a secret disease which one cannot really hide! Suddenly he thought also of Tolstoy's "Resurrection", of Prince Dmitri the hero of that story. So this disease was endemic among the prosperous classes in every country! Hadn't Dmitri the idealist grown slowly but surely into the same disease:

'Now the purpose of women, all women except those of his own family and the wives of his friends, was definitely one; women were the best means towards an already enjoyed experience'.

Interrupting his thoughts, Geeta put down a well-filled tiffin-carrier before him.

'Your food has such a tempting flavour that I feel like eating it all at once', Kanai complimented her.

Nepi had got up already, tiffin-carrier in hand. 'Let's hurry, Kanoo-da'.

Even Kanai's pleasant way of trying to cheer her up, did not produce a smile of satisfaction on Geeta's face. She looked unusually pale, even for her. Kanai had not noticed it so far, or perhaps she had so long tried to put on a brave face. 'What is it troubling you, Geeta?' he asked in an affectionate tone.

Geeta's lips trembled, but before she could speak, tears rolled down her cheeks.

'Tell me, please, Geeta', Kanai asked, anxiously.

'Nepi-da was telling me—that Hiren—last night—'

She could not say any more. Obviously Nepi, in his

simplicity, had told her how her brother Hiren had hit Kanai in the theatre. 'It was nothing at all, Geeta', Kanai laughingly held out his arm, 'Here, have a look. It's only a scratch. Don't I know that Hiren loves me? Possibly he thought I was going to hit him or something'. He laughed again.

That did not seem to stop Geeta's streaming tears.

'Now then, Geeta dear, please don't cry. Why must you cry so? Is it because Hiren's your brother? In that case, then, you wouldn't have cried if one of my own brothers did the same to me. So I conclude you think of me as a complete stranger. That won't be right, Geeta. You must not cry.'

The poor girl wiped her eyes with the end of her *Sari*. 'You must try to be cheerful, Geeta', Kanai added gently, 'you have to turn a new leaf, so to say. I've heard you cry at night. Why must you? You've got to be a changed girl from now, haven't you?'

'Could you possibly find out how father and mother's getting on, Kanoo-da?' She asked at last.

Kanai looked at her in some surprise. 'Father has a very weak heart', she added, 'The air raid might have upset him.' Tears surged out in her eyes again.

What she had said made Kanai think also of his own people at home. His mother, his brothers and sisters; his aunt, moving crookedly in a kind of erratic life; his uncle, ridden by disease and proud as a peacock; his ancient grandmother, blind and completely deaf, the wick of her life burning pathetically with uncanny continuity! Could the old, old woman understand what it was all about when the siren sounded? Was there not one normal soul among them, to try and buck up the poor demented creatures in that anxious time?



'Kanoo-da!' Nepi called out impatiently.

'I'll try and get you some news in the afternoon, Geeta', Kanai said, 'but we must be off now'.

'One moment, please,' Geeta said, and she bowed low at Kanai's feet.

'But why all this?' Kanai protested.

'Bejoy-da will take me to a nurses' training school to-day and get me admitted there', she answered.

Kanai could not resist a sigh. Geeta was to-day entering on a path of life to which she was a stranger. What she had seen and dreamt of in childhood as her life in the future must now be forgotten.

### (XIX)

It was winter, and besides, the new Indian Standard time had been introduced. And so it was eight o'clock almost as soon as it was light. One had to get ready quickly lest one should be late in reaching office. Already, therefore, Calcutta streets were swarming with traffic—motor cars, trams, buses, hackney carriages, rickshaws. The city had just the same look as ever. Earlier in the morning there had been a lot of excitement in the air over the air-raid of the night before; it was still there, no doubt, but the wheel of the day's work did not stop turning normally. Discussion, even animated discussion, of the unwonted incident was still rife, but nowhere had the air-raid dislocated the discipline of daily work. It gave Kanai quite a surprise. How could a people, disarmed and dependent, unused for years to the experience of war conditions, display such calm endurance? Or was it that the sheer search for food had made them so insensitive that they had lost even that sense of awareness which would have helped them to realise the gravity of the

dangers ahead? No, it couldn't quite be that, he mused. Kanai was himself in that apparently insensitive crowd, and there was Nepi too. They were proceeding to the affected area to help, look after the air-raid victims in the bustees. How could he imagine that they had no awareness and no understanding and felt no incentive towards service of the people?

Kanai and Nepi waited at a bus-stand in the city's outskirts.

Military lorries were passing by, an unending stream. Some carried a crowd of Chinese soldiers. From the suburbs a row of these lorries entered the city, another row moved out of the city towards the suburbs. This went on daily, at all hours, unceasingly. That day, however, this impressive military covement took on suddenly an extraordinary significance. The sight of it seemed to rouse in a moment the sense of ominous urgency in the war situation.

Asking the way to . . . pur, Kanai recalled the story of the newly built workshop in Amal's garden. It was the same area, he thought, suddenly, and there floated before his eyes the vision of homeless people wandering desolately, men, women and children, with their pathetic possessions, a few cattle and utensils. He thought, especially, of the pretty young girl who was in the crowd and drew Amal's attention. Perhaps—perhaps, he thought excitedly, it was on their poor heads that the bombs had dropped last night. He felt weary of waiting. 'When's the bus going to start?' he asked the driver, impatiently.

He got no reply. Obviously the driver wished to emphasise by his silence that he would start when it was time, not a second earlier.

'I say, brother', Kanai tried again.

The indifference melted a little. 'We start when the

whistle goes', the driver answered, his tones still icy. His whole being had merged into the life of the fast-moving machine; his body and mind were linked, during the eight-hour period of his work, with the steering wheel, the gears, the brakes. And whatever little leisure he could find between runs, he would enjoy in the exhilaration of tired laziness. He was just looking at the crowds on the street and did not care for Kanai's interrogation.

The crowds increased as the day advanced.

Beggars swarmed round the bus, importuning the passengers for a coin. 'Look at my condition, father: You'll have my blessings and become a king!' 'Take pity on a poor blind soul!'

'Have you got an *anna* on you, Kanoo-da?', Nepi asked quietly. Kanai put his hand into his pocket to see if he had any.

'This woman doesn't look like a professional beggar, she might belong to a respectable family'. Nepi added.

Kanai turned round and seemed to turn into stone. A woman stood there, in tattered rags but deeply veiled still, hesitantly stretching out her trembling, shrunken palm. In spite of the veil, Kanai seemed to recognise her. He must have seen her off on before. Yes, it was Geeta's mother, there could not be any doubt about it. But what on earth had been the matter with her? Why didn't she have even a bangle on her wrist? And why had she put on widow's clothing? He shuddered to think that, in that case, Geeta must have lost her father. He got up in a moment, took out a rupee and gave it to Nepi, and said, 'You go ahead, Nepi, please. I can't come with you, now.'

Nepi looked at him in surprise. 'But Kanoo-da? How can that be?'

Kanai did not reply; he rushed out of the bus.

Sarojini, that is, Geeta's mother, had overheard his voice ; she saw him coming down from the bus, and at once she turned round and hurried into the nearest lane.

Sarojini's story was excruciating.

The great city was built on the foundations laid by the machine civilisation of the twentieth century—a whirlwind of ceaseless work. And in that whirlwind men seemed to have lost themselves and lost the power to think of any but themselves. When somebody died on a roadside, crowds would collect, ejaculate a few exclamations of sorrow and rush off to work. This was not the kind of society where life was slow-moving, where mutual sympathy and assistance were matters of course. The new society, frenziedly active, had made money the criterion of all judgment. So even when a man died, hardly any would waste help or sympathy on him, while professional undertakers would be easily available, you could get a car sent to carry the corpse to the place of funeral if only you spent some money, and what you needed for the funeral rites you could buy from the well-stocked shops in proportion to the length of your purse. Naturally, therefore, in such a society nobody had even the leisure to find out what had happened in a few desperate days to Sarojini and to her husband. Nobody even had the desire to do so.

Since the day that their boy Hiren had left the house, Sarojini alone with her invalid, ill-tempered husband, prayed helplessly to her God to show a way out. She had prayed for her own death and her husband's too. 'You take us both out of this rut', she had prayed pathetically, but nobody listened. She saw none to whom she could turn for help. Formerly, when she had not fallen on such cruel days, she had gone from time to time to the Chakravarti house, she had spoken to Kanai's mother. Geeta and Uma,

Kanai's sister, were friends, and it was this relationship which gave her the title, so to speak, and Kanai's mother would help to the best of her power. But since Geeta had left home, she dared not go near that house. The Chakravartis concluded that Kanai had left for Geeta's sake and owing to her blandishments ; they would rain abuse at Geeta's people. 'They're prostitutes, nothing more or less. That hussy used her miserable charms to steal our boy!'

Geeta's father, on his part, would shout ugly curses at Kanai and all his family. He would not stop there, either. He vilely abused his wife, to give vent to his pent-up anger, and even beat her from time to time.

Sarojini had hoped for a time that Hiren would return. But he did not. The little chap felt no end of affection for his parents, for Geeta ; but he had run clean out of the unhealthy atmosphere of the family, its want and cruelties, and had found some solace. He did not wish to return again. When at the theatre he tried to stab Kanai, it was only a queer psychological expression of his love for his parents engulfed in shame and misery. He loved his people, but he could not bring himself to plunge his young life again into the old cesspool of senseless suffering.

At heart Sarojini had felt relieved that Geeta had left home with Kanai, she had imagined her Geeta setting up a new life with Kanai, she had blessed him with all her soul. All that she knew about the matter was what she had heard from the old woman who made a living by helping to arrange marriages. 'Kanai belongs to the Chakravartis', she had told her, 'they're just that sort. He must have enticed poor Geeta. What a shame!' And villain that she was, she pretended being horribly scandalised.

But Sarojini had felt immeasurably relieved. At any rate her Geeta had found release from the utterest humili-

liation. She had no manner of doubt that Geeta and Kanai loved each other, or how could all that happen? And she prayed fervently that their love proved true. Perhaps they would not get married—wasn't that expecting too much?—but they could live together in a little household of their own, like so many others do in the great, big city. She had felt tears welling into her eyes, and the tear-drops had trickled down her haggard cheeks—she had not even thought of wiping them.

The marriage-broker had whispered to her, 'That gentleman, you know, has taken such a fancy to your Geeta. He's very rich and influential and he tells me to inform the police and find out where she is.'

It gave her a creepy feeling to hear such talk.

'Don't you worry', the old woman had added, with a meaning smile, 'He's very prosperous, and you know what a rich man's fancy can be'.

Sarojini vehemently shook her head in protest.

'Well, in that case, please yourself', the old woman said angrily and left.

For some days after this, Geeta's parents sank to the lowliest depths of poverty. There was in the house an empty steel trunk made in old-time style. They sold it for a beggarly rupee. The war had sent prices of all necessities reeling ever so high—rice could not be had at less than eighteen *rupees* a *maund*, the invalid husband needed some sago every night, medicines had to be bought and opium also, which the husband being a long addict could not do without. A rupees could not be stretched far enough, anyhow. The landlord had come the other day and demanded payment of three months' arrears. Geeta's father, ill-tempered and sick, had told him off. 'You better go to law'. he had shouted. But it was not so easy to frighten the

landlord. 'I'll see how you dare talk like that', he had threatened. 'I'll hang myself before I've to go to law to kick out a tenant of your sort. Pay up quick, I give you till tomorrow and then if you don't pay, well, I'll get some ruffians to shove you out of here. Going to lay! You are that trick on me, eh?'

When the landlord left, the invalid had a violent fit and Sarojini nursed him tenderly. But as soon as he was better, he vented his spleen on his wife by beating her with the fan she had in her hand to keep him cool. In sheer exasperation, she went to the marriage-broker for help. There wasn't a grain of rice in the house; the invalid husband, his temper completely upset, was having asthmatic spasms. Couldn't the old woman get her a cook's job at least, so that she could earn a few coins and buy some food?

The old woman had given her a *seer* of rice, and assurance of further help also.

That very evening she came, nearly running, to Sarojini and said, 'I say, you come along with me and do what I say. You'll make some money, too'.

Sarojini was very nervous and could not quite make out what was meant. The old woman took out a *than* (widow's costume) and said, 'you put this on, quick'.

When Sarojini simply stared in confusion, she added, 'Take off your iron bangle—', and proceeded herself to wipe the vermilion mark on her forehead.

'No', Sarojini said and stepped back, she could not reconcile herself to dressing up as a widow when her husband was alive.

'Now then, my good woman, you must listen to me, or I quit. That gentleman has come today. I told him that Geeta's father was dead and that he should give some help.

You do what I tell you and then you might get twenty or twentyfive rupees.'

Sarojini continued to stare, as if she did not understand a word.

'Mere begging doesn't help much', the old woman went on. 'You have to tell people your woes, and you have to manufacture stories too'.

From the other room the invalid Pradyot shouted 'Why not listen to *Bamundidi*, you miserable bitch!'

Sarojini said nothing, but she did not protest either, when the old woman wiped off the vermilion mark, and without a word put on the widow's costume. Without a word, again, she had gone to the woman's house, stood before Amal and put out her palm, silently. Amal had given her two ten-rupee notes. Tears dripped from her eyes under the veil, and Amal, noticing it, gave another ten-rupee note. 'I haven't got more on me today, but I'll see what I can do to help, next time', he said as he went off.

'He's crazy about Geeta', the old woman said as she dragged Sarojini home. 'He's going to inform the police, he tells me. Meantime here's my commission'. And she picked out a ten-rupee note. 'Twenty rupees will do for you now, I'm sure'. She gave a queer laugh and added, 'Why not eat well and put on some fat? Who'll think you're Geeta's mother? You do look good!'

The way she talked made Sarojini feel chilled in her bones. 'Well, here's your home. I'll be off', the old woman had said. But Sarojini stood there, struck motionless as it were, her mind a complete vacuum. Air raid precautions could not black out the wonderful moonlight which had flooded even the narrow lane. She did not know how long she stood there, clad in lonely white, like an apparition in the moonlight. She came back to her senses when the siren



sounded, and startled, she ran into the house. She knew her husband had a weak heart and was afraid.

Pradyot sat at home, his eyes agape, his body trembling all over. 'Where were you all this time?' he shouted in white-hot anger.

Sarojini could not at once think out what to say in reply.

'Why in the devil's name are you so late?' he shouted again, and catching sight of the widow's costume she had on, went on raving, 'So that's what you've been up to, you bitch!'

'Please don't go on like that', Sarojini pleaded.

'What?' Pradyot burst out; 'You think I haven't my wits about me, don't you? I see your game now, you conspired with that damned woman, that cursed marriage-broker, dressed up as a widow and went on the spree—'. He began tearing his hair widely.

Sarojini was astounded at the accusation. But before she could collect herself, the demented husband jumped on to her and tried to strangle her. When she came to, she saw she was lying on the floor and there were no signs of Pradyot—the two ten-rupee notes had vanished, too.

It was during the alert that Pradyot had left. He thought she was dead and he went off aimlessly with the two notes in his pocket.

For a while Sarojini felt a deep pang of grief. But she thought also of the release that had come at last to her. And so at dawn she collected a few miserable belongings—two worn-out *Saris*, a mug, a dented aluminium glass and an old enamel plate. She had not forgotten that the landlord had threatened to come with his ruffians to eject them the next morning.

She did not go to the house of the marriage broker, either. For once she had thought of changing out of her

widow's costume into her normal dress and to tie two little knots of red thread round her wrist as the symbol of wifehood. But the next moment, her mind revolted at the thought. It was better she was clad like a widow. Besides, she had learnt the day before that if she must beg to get a living, she must do her best to be able to evoke sympathy. So, dressed as a destitute widow, she proceeded to where the buses started on their rounds.

It was there that she saw Kanai. And though hunger gnawed at her stomach, she could not help being thoroughly ashamed and hastened down the lane out of Kanai's sight.

Kanai could not quite follow her down the lane. He had missed the trail and looked round near the pavement. For a while he stood and mused. So, Geeta's father must have died, or Sarojini, now a widow, would not have come out to beg. Of course, it was a happy release for Pradyot. But how did he die? He recalled Geeta telling him that her father had a very weak heart and she was afraid of what might happen to him. Perhaps last night, during those hours of anxious agony, his heart had failed. And his wife Sarojini, completely helpless and alone, had returned without a penny from the funeral and was now a beggar on the streets.

The bus which he and Nepi had boarded had left. Kanai looked listlessly at the road it had taken. Like that fast-moving bus, Nepi's life seemed to move, quick and unhesitating, oblivious of attachments he left behind without regrets. Nepi had gone—to tend the sick and the wounded. But Kanai—his life's movement had been crippled by Geeta. Bejoy had taken all charge of Geeta, but he could not yet unburden himself of Geeta's troubles. Kanai entered a tiny tea-shop and ordered a cup. What would he tell Geeta when he went back, he wondered.

She still had a deep attachment for her parents. Didn't her lips tremble the other day as she spoke of her parents, though they had not shrunk from pushing her down the slough of degradation just in order to get something to eat? But there was nothing to be wondering at in all this, was there? Weren't Bengali women like that? How much more could they be capable of, when for a thousand years they have lived in sheer helplessness, dependent in childhood on the father, in youth on the husband and in old age on the sons? Weren't they denuded of all privileges, to retain only one—the privilege of serving father, husband and sons? And all the life that was in them found vent in a river with a thousand streams—in love, in affection, in devotion and service; all the sorrows of frustration and exclusion from life's prerogatives were transmuted into the self-abnegation of conscious sacrifice. Kanai thought of his own mother, his great-aunt, and his great-grandmother, the ninety-year-old lump of ancient flesh. He felt a certain perturbation. His people lived not far from where he was—wasn't it a good idea for him to go and see how they were? . . . . He stared at the empty cup before him. Another bus was leaving for the suburb which Nepi had perhaps reached already. Wasn't there a tug-of-war in his life—Nepi pulling at one end and Geeta at the other? For the moment it seemed as if Geeta's pull was stronger. Or he would not have been sitting in that tea-shop and worrying over Geeta's problems and the problems of those he had left behind to move up in life's race. And if he was really worrying about them, what stopped him going to the house straight and inquiring how everybody was? What would Nepi have done in the circumstances, he wondered. Of course, he would have gone without hesitation and performed to perfection whatever he considered to be his duty.

Kanai smiled indulgently as he asked himself why he was so weak, so undecided. How could he rid himself of his birth-marks? Didn't Sukhamoy Chakravarti's tainted blood flow also in his veins, and how could the old and dilapidated mystery of a house where he had lived so long fail to influence his character? He got up, however, and shook himself out of his musings with an effort. He would prepare himself, for going ahead. He would visit the old house and make the inquiries he thought he should . . . . Nepi had gone a long way already . . . . Kanai thought suddenly of Neela. Could Bejoy bring her back? Or was it that she also, like Nepi, alone and unafraid, had marched up the road that stretched without limit ahead of them?

## (XX)

Meja-babu, Kanai's grand-uncle, was reciting some blank verses with great feeling in the histrionic manner. Climbing the dark stairs in the ancient home of the Chakravartis, Kanai heard his voice and stopped suddenly. Had the old man begun to drink so early in the day? He could make out some of the lines he was declaiming:

'My God—O my God!

'The *Mainak* peak's submerged in the sea,

'You've tumbled to the dust the stately *Vindhyas*,

'Proudly holding converse with the stars . . . .

'Aren't you still appeased?'

'Why worry so much?' Kanai heard his grand-aunt plead to her husband.

'You're asking me?' A volcanic rage found vent in the way the old man made the retort.

'It's God's will', the wife put in quietly, 'He'll do what is best'.

'Ah-a! He'll do it, will He?', he laughed theatrically. 'Yes, He has done all he could. The Chakravartis will be extinct. Either this old ruin of a house will be bombed into dust and under the debris we shall all pop off. Or we will all starve and die. That's all.'

After a short silence, the old man continued: 'Why does everybody eat such enormous meals, like giants do? How many times have I told you to save a morsel of rice every day from out of the daily portion? But you'll never listen, will you? And now all's over. The tenants have left. I feared as much last night. After the 'All Clear' last night, I told everybody to get up early in the morning and go and see how the *bustee* people were. But nobody cared. And now they've all gone. Rightly served, I should think. I'll see what we fill our stomachs with, now —Ha-Ha!'

'But your co-sharers have sold their portion of the *bustee*.'

'Oh, have they?'

'They'll sell it today and they're leaving, either tonight or tomorrow. "We wouldn't like to be killed by bombs", that's what they're saying.'

'They may do what they jolly well like', the old man burst out, 'but I stay here—put! I won't move a limb, not me!'

'But when they're all going—' the wife tried to say.

'Let them go', he shouted, 'I don't care a damn.'

And when his wife, fearing his temper, remained silent, he went on: 'Yes, they're going, but I ask you, so what? What'll they get to eat when the little money's gone?'

The whole *bustee* is mortgaged, and they'll get precious little indeed, when the debts are cleared! And they've a crowd of children—three or four daughters, too. How are they going to arrange the marriage of the daughters? Selling their lands, huh?

'If it's God's will, it will be done', his wife answered.

'Yes, yes, I know. But God will judge them for their sins, too, won't He? Didn't that blighter of a son of this house, the family's pride, a live B.Sc., run off with an unmarried girl the other day? It's sin, horrid sin, and the family'll have to pay for it . . . . We sinned also, in our time, of course we did; we went to whore-houses, we drank—I drink still when I have half a chance—we have sinned, yes, but not in this fashion, never!'

Kanai heard the conversation and felt the blood flowing quicker in his veins. So they were talking about him and his sin! Meja-Babu was quite worked up, and his voice now sounded thin and pathetic. 'O God of our fathers, what have we done to deserve this cruel slur on the Chakravartis? Why did you give that wretch such dreadful notions? Why didn't you hurl at him a thunderbolt—' His imprecations were incomplete when suddenly there emerged from the stairs the figure of Kanai himself.

For a moment he stared in sheer surprise, but as Kanai moved quietly towards him, he recovered his wits and shouted. 'Get out of here, get out at once, you shameless wretch, you lousy villain! You've done enough damage to our family already, get out!'

His wife looked at Kanai, completely astounded. There was not a trace of shame or remorse on Kanai's face.

'I have something to tell you', Kanai said quietly.

'You can't possibly have anything to tell me. Get out.'

'No', Kanai insisted, 'I've got to.'

'I see. You think you haven't?'

'It isn't that at all. I want to explain.'

'Didn't you run away with that girl—'

Kanai stopped him. 'I'll tell you all about that'.

'So that isn't true? You didn't take her away?'

'I did. But—'

Impatiently, Mejababu stopped him. 'But what? Have you married her, then?'

'No.'

'Then what?'

'I want to tell you. But I'll speak to you in private.'

Mejababu looked straight at Kanai's face and said, 'All right then, go on with your story'.

'Not here. I'll tell you in private.'

'I see', said Mejababu and took him inside the room. As he went in, he warned his wife not to tell anybody that Kanai had come. 'Shut the door behind you' he said to Kanai.

Without a word, the old man listened to the story Kanai related to him. He looked grave, his limbs in complete repose. Kanai had never seen him like that. He looked so different from his usual self—there was none of his abnormality, the result of long intemperance, and the maniac restlessness which had been so accentuated by perpetual want. 'Yes. Tell me more', he said, at last.

'I took her out of her surroundings', Kanai continued 'because I want to rescue her from the lowest depths of degradation. If she stayed at home, her fate would have been sealed'.

'Why didn't you bring her here? Why didn't you come to me?'

Kanai paused a second before he spoke. 'It was just then that I had decided to leave this house for good and all.'

'Why?' Mejababu was quite startled.

'This house is done for', Kanai replied, 'I want to live and so I've left it'.

Mejababu continued looking straight at his face.

'I have kept that girl in the charge of a friend whom I call *dada* (elder brother). He is a political worker and a bachelor. He has arranged that Geeta should be trained as a nurse, and to-day she is to be admitted in the training school.'

Mejababu continued still to stare at Kanai. Then the old man sighed deeply, stretched his right hand and put it on Kanai's head. 'Bless you, bless you', he repeated quietly. A few big drops rolled off his weary eyes. He cleared his throat and spoke again. 'You've done no wrong, Kanoo. God bless you'.

Kanai bowed low and took the dust of his feet. 'What you've said is true, very true', Mejababu added, 'This house is damned. But you have left, and in you the Chakravartis will continue to live'.

The old man drew himself to his full length. Kanai looked in astonishment at the nobility which suddenly seemed to spread over his body and shake it clean of all decay and pettiness. For years the Chakravartis had accumulated wealth at the cost of countless people, but they had collected also perhaps some aristocracy of spirit, whose remnant seemed now personified in the old man. 'You've left us', he added, 'only in order that you might live as men should do. Yes, go your way and don't turn back . . . Your mother's ill with anxiety for you, but don't go and see her, for if you do, you may not go out again. She won't let you go.'

Kanai was visibly shaken to hear of his mother being



ill. But Mejababu said again: 'Don't be so agitated. I'm telling you—for the sake of the family. You've mustered the courage to go... Don't come back to this hell, then. One gets used to partings. But if you now give up the freedom you're going to earn, you'll never get it back again.'

'I don't know what you've done already or will be doing later'. The old man had grown quite voluble. 'But do something really worthwhile... So that the sins of the Chakravartis can be washed away... And—', he added with a queer laugh, 'when we die, don't mind observing the obsequies. And, of course, if you get married, let's have a look at the bride, eh?'

Kanai left the house in a mood of complete contentment; a load had vanished off his mind. There was no element of effusion in his quiet and restful delight, but he felt at the same time that like the young bird leaving his nest to taste the freedom of the skies, and soaring ever more speedily on his unladen wings, he would move ahead faster in life's race. For he had found that day his real release from the mysterious hold of the dark and winding house of the Chakravartis. He felt as if by his unhampered tread a new highway was to be fashioned into the world's scheme, and the shame of his erring forbears obliterated. He had never looked upon Mejababu with any respect. The story of his forefathers and their wealth appeared to him little more than clever, parasitic exploitation. In life's process he had seen only leisure and luxury injecting poison even into his own system. But the conversation with Mejababu that morning was like balm to his fevered soul. There must have been some good in his forbears, they must have fulfilled some need in society at some time, and perhaps he owed something of that good sense which was in him to his

unlamented forefathers. Kanai recalled the mythological story about *Durvasa*, the wrathful sage, but he told himself that his temper and his imprecations were not *Durvasa's* sole title to remembrance, for wasn't it him who gave the world the nectar that came out of the churning of the sea, wasn't it the angry sage who gave *Dhanvantari* the first healing herbs for suffering humanity? Kanai had never before been able to forgive his evil-living forefathers, but that day he realised how wrong he had been to turn an unseeing eye towards the good that must have been in them.

He stood for a while, aimlessly, at the cross-roads, near a famous confectioner's shop. Some eight or ten people, obviously straight from the country, sat on the pavement; an anomaly of hessian and torn cotton coverlets on their shoulders, and with a few broken steel plates they sat and gaped at the traffic before them. Rows of military lorries went north and just as many serried southwards also. Occasionally a few of the giant contraptions moved east. Besides, there were the usual trams and buses. The village folk seemed staggered by the scene. They sat without a word, the silence broken at intervals by infants crying for food.

Hungry people were pouring from the country into the town. They knew of the danger of air raids, but they were goaded by the hope of a few little crumbs to keep body and soul together.

Who did not know that in Midnapore and in South Bengal generally there was a very serious shortage of food? The entire country seemed to be drifting towards disaster. There was gambling galore in the rice and paddy market. Prices were soaring from day to day. How long could the poor peasant resist selling off their grain to the racketeers. War was being followed, inevitably, by famine.

A lorry went past, stacked with fresh fruit and vegetables. Kanai looked round and saw row on row of appetising sweets arranged neatly in the shop's showcase. He could not help laughing when he saw that one of the sweets had a name—"Shall eat again!" What the destitutes there would get to eat, he reflected, should be called—"Shall never eat again!"

He did not feel like boarding a tram, and walked straight to Bejoy's house. Shasthi, the servant, was alone. 'Where is Bejoy-da?' Kanai asked him. 'And Geeta and all the others?'

'He's taken Geeta to some school, I don't know the name. He'll be back after his office work's over.'

'I see', Kanai began taking off his coat.

'Will you be having your food here?' Shasthi asked apprehensively.

'Yes, of course'.

'But—there's no rice, sir.'

'No rice?'

Shasthi spoke apologetically: 'How could I know, sir, that you'd be back, when you left so early with Nepi-babu? Besides Miss Neela ate the rice that had been cooked. What could I do?'

'Neela? So Neela had her food here?'

'Oh yes, sir. There's her suit-case, you see, sir? She had some food and then went off to work'.

Kanai took off his coat and sat down, wrapped in thought. So Neela had come back....

## (XXI)

'Let me have some money, please, sir', said Shasthi, 'and I'll run up and get something for you. Shall I get

some rice and curry from the hotel, or some *loochis* and vegetables?’

‘*Loochis*?’ Kanai said, ‘But Shasthi, couldn’t you get me some rice cooked here at home?’

‘There’s no fire in the oven, sir.’ There was not a note of hesitancy in Shasthi’s unconcerned voice.

‘Oh, but you can light it up.’

‘You think so, sir, but how can I? Coal sells at two rupees a *maund*, and yet you can’t get it. There’s only a little left in the house for the evening meal. And tomorrow if we can’t get a fresh supply, there’ll be no cooking done.’

Coal was really disappearing from the market. Rice and pulses were equally unavailable. One heard sometimes that there were places where everything could be got very cheap. It was shopkeepers leaving town for fear of air-raids who were alleged to be selling their stock at rock-bottom prices. But one only heard of such people, never saw them.

Perhaps, Kanai thought, it was Amal and his tribe of profiteers who were buying up stock from frightened little traders. It was all in their day’s work.

Did the Amals of this earth have anything to contribute to social welfare? . . .

Kanai remembered the two little outhouses which the Rai Bahadur, Amal’s father, had magnanimously converted into a public air-raid shelter!

Perhaps in the days of the Sukhamoy Chakravartis, they still could perform a somewhat useful role in society. But in the present day Amal and his tribe had played out their part. And so they could be likened to unseasonable rain. In its proper season, rain cloaks earth’s bosom with the beautiful plentitude of life-sustaining grain, but out

of season, the same rain pours putrefaction on ripening crops.

Shasthi interrupted Kanai's musings: 'What shall I get for you then, sir? I don't think you'd like rice and curry from the hotel over there. Shall I get you some sweets? I've to buy some for Neela-di, when she comes back. I can buy the whole lot now, if you want me to, sir.'

Kanai took a four-anna piece out of his pocket and gave it to the servant. 'You buy whatever you fancy', he said, listlessly, and stretched himself on the bed. So Neela had come back, he reflected. . . . He was tired, very tired. He had not slept the night before, and had wandered a good deal in the morning. He had not, in his excitement, realised so long that he was really very tired. Of a sudden, as it were, all his nerves strained for oblivion.

When Shasthi returned, he saw Kanai fast asleep. He called him several times, but got no reply. Ever ready to sleep himself, he kept the food under cover, and soon began snoring. Kanai got up after some hours, roused by the sound of a loud knock on the outer door, but Shasthi still snored peacefully. 'Shasthi!' he cried, 'get up and answer the door. There's somebody knocking'.

'Yes', Shasthi responded in a sleepy voice, but made no signs of a move.

Kanai looked at the time-piece on the shelf and saw it was past five. 'Get up, Shasthi, it's late', he said in a loud voice, and went down himself to find out who it was at the door.

'Oh, it's you', he said as he opened the door and saw Neela, back from work.

'You here?' Neela asked back.

Kanai gave a polite smile. 'Yes, it's me all right.'

'Has Nepi come back with you?'

'No. You see, I couldn't accompany him.'

Neela said no more and went upstairs. Kanai remained where he was. Neela had come back from work. She would have a wash; why only a wash, she would perhaps have a good bath, would carefully make herself up and then, maybe, go to a cinema or a restaurant, where her two foreign friends would also turn up. He should not, therefore, go upstairs, Kanai reflected. But he was famishing, he must have something to eat. He went out to a tea-shop and ordered a cup of tea and some bread and butter. The place was crowded. The winter day was already drawing to a close, the last rays of the sun could be seen only on the crest of the tallest houses, the evening was approaching. Everybody in the shop discussed the raid of the night before, grave prognostications of another raid that night were being discussed. There was excitement, and also fear, in the air; one could sense it in the way people looked and spoke. On the streets pedestrians walked with extraordinary haste. Perhaps with nightfall, the sinister sound of the air raid siren would be heard again . . . Kanai finished his meal and got up. He had to hurry to his office after dark.

Returning to the house, he stayed out on the verandah. 'Shasti, I have to be going to work', he said, and sat for a while on an old deck-chair spread out there.

'All right, sir,' said Shasthi, absent-mindedly.

But Neela came out, and as Kanai got up on seeing her, she said, 'Please don't get up'.

Kanai only gave a weak smile in reply.

'Where had you been, Kanai Babu?' Neela asked. 'I made some tea and looked for you, but you were gone'.

'I had only gone out for a while. I've had my tea, thanks.'

'I see', Neela said, and went inside.

She came out, however, the next moment. Kanai felt she wanted to say something. Perhaps it was about Nepi that she wanted to talk. 'Please don't worry', he said to Neela, 'Nepi'll come back all right'.

'Nepi?', Neela smiled, 'It's useless worrying about him, Kanai Babu. Even mother has given up worrying on his account. Perhaps he would come back at midnight and give a mild knock at the door, or perhaps he'd lie down curled up on the door-step for the night. Perhaps, again, he'll be back after three days'.

Kanai smiled as she spoke.

'I want to ask you something, if you don't mind.' Neela spoke again.

'Of course', Kanai smiled, 'Of course I won't mind'.

'Why are you sending Geeta to a nurses' training centre?'

'What could I do?', Kanai replied, 'Bejoy-da is arranging everything, and Geeta seems to like it too. Why should I object?'

'You should have helped her to carry on her studies.' Neela said in a tone of expostulation.

'I felt the same way too', Kanai replied. 'But on second thoughts I decided that what Bejoy-da proposed was better. It takes a long time to complete one's studies and stand on one's own feet. And even then, it's very uncertain'.

'But surely, education is important in itself?'

'Yes, of course', Kanai smiled, 'but you see, mere idealism doesn't cut any ice, does it? You wouldn't like Geeta to remain for a long time a burden on other people. She must be in a position to rely on herself or still have to

undergo humiliations—' He stopped short, and Neela looked at his face in surprise.

'If you knew that girl's history, Miss Sen', Kanai continued, 'you'd see how piteous, how excruciating it has been'.

Neela did not say a word, but there was eager questioning in her eyes. Kanai let fall a sigh and went on, 'She's been a very unfortunate girl, Miss Sen, and you'd shrink to hear the price she had to pay for the crime of being born in a poor and unfortunate family. Her parents lived in a *bustee* near our house, a *bustee* where a number of respectable people lived. I have known her since she was a child. I would notice how quiet and shy she was, how loaded with the fear that the world hotly censured her and her people. She was about the same age as my little sister and I got them to meet and be friends. She read together with my sister in the local school where the head mistress gave her a free studentship. She couldn't afford to buy any books and my sister would lend her hers. I feel towards her much as I do towards my sister. But I'm sure Bejoy-da is right. Why should she depend on me to carry on her studies?'

Kanai's voice grew sadder, as he spoke, and Neela felt deeply for the poor girl in her plight. She leant on the verandah railing and looked straight ahead of her, strangely disturbed. The accidental conversation had, without her knowing it so far, lifted a load off her mind. As people walking on a path make it smooth and easy to step on, the conversation had shaken off the hesitancy, even the hostility, that seemed to have grown between them. It helped her ask him with their old-time frankness: 'But surely, you didn't take Geeta away from her parents merely



on account of what she was being made to suffer. In our country—'

Kanai interrupted her, 'Please, Miss Sen, you had better not hear the whole story.'

'As you please', said Neela, 'But I would like to tell you something, if you don't mind'.

'Do, by all means.'

'You shouldn't put off marrying the girl whom you have rescued, and taken away from her parents'.

Kanai shook his head slowly and gravely. 'No, that's impossible'.

'But why?' Neela asked him.

He looked at her face with something of a desperate air. 'Our blood's tainted, Miss Sen. It is quite likely that I shall turn out to be insane. It runs in our family'.

Neela looked back in pained surprise. He collected himself and smiled. 'You see our family was among the top-notchers in Calcutta, and this disease is the curse of aristocracy.'

She looked down at the street and did not say a word. After a while, Kanai smiled again and said, 'I didn't have a chance of meeting your friends last night—I mean the two English soldiers who were with you at the theatre. Perhaps one day you'll introduce me.'

'I know them very slightly', she answered, 'But of course, if we meet again, I'll introduce you'.

Kanai looked sharply at Neela. How could it be that one could go to a play with foreigners whom one knew only cursorily? She was still looking down, fatigued by her day's work or overwhelmed by a sort of melancholy detachment which had come over her since she heard Geeta's story. She did not notice the bitterness in Kanai's glance.

After a moment she spoke without looking up. 'Those

two lads were extremely nice—not at all like what we mean by 'tommies'. One of them was up at Oxford when the War broke out and the other had just left his studies—'

Shasthicharan, Bejoy's worthy servitor, turned up now and interrupted the talk. 'Kanai Babu, please, why didn't you eat the food I left covered up for you?'

'Food?' Kanai asked.

'Yes. I brought it in and saw you were asleep. So I kept it covered up.'

Neela got worried, 'So you didn't eat all day?'

Kanai smiled, 'Well, in the morning Geeta made me gorge, and in the afternoon too I've been to the tea-shop'.

'You better eat these sweets, too, sir', Shasthi pleaded.

'No, Shasthi, I'd rather not'.

Shasthi did not seem to like it. 'Why must these be wasted when good money has been paid? You please eat it, it won't hurt.'

'N-no. You better give it away to somebody'.

'Give it away?'

'Yes, yes.'

There was a knock on the outer door. Kanai leant over the railing and saw it was Nepi. The lad would never call out. He would get back home so late as a rule that it was habitual with him to give only a mild knock. Kanai hastened downstairs to let him in.

When Nepi entered the room, Kanai got a shock. His hair was unkempt, he looked most awfully tired, and there were patches of blood on his clothes. He smiled with an effort and said, 'It was a horrid sight, Kanoo-da. The bombs had dropped on a *bustee*, and some unfortunates have suffered. How frightful it was! Some have lost their arm, others their leg, and some have had splinters shooting

through their chest or shoulder. I expect severed limbs and fingers are still strewn about in the *bustee*'.

Kanai sighed deeply. War had begun calling for its innocent victims right in the heart of Calcutta.

Nepi said after a while, 'I can't tell you, Kanoo-da, what I saw . . . There was a big, strong fellow, badly injured. He was in pain like a wounded beast and his wife—she had luckily survived—sat beside him, like dumb, you know, and not a tear in her eyes. She was very pretty too.'

'How many have died, Nepi?' Kanai and Nepi turned round together to see Neela who had just come down from upstairs.

'Not many, I should think,' Nepi replied. 'It wasn't exactly a direct hit. Quite a good few have been injured by splinters. Some twenty people are badly injured, I expect'.

'You must go and have your bath now, Nepi', Neela said.

Nepi made a move, but stopped after a few paces, 'But you must come along with me tomorrow, please Kanoo-da'.

Kanai did not reply. He was thinking of the helpless victims of the raid. Perhaps they were lucky dying as they did. Would they have been better off alive than dead? For instead of a cruel but sudden release, they would have been confronted every moment with a slow but sure movement towards them of death by starvation, death by degrees. The famine had cast its shadows before—it was creeping relentlessly ahead like a huge and utterly intent serpent. The cyclone—exports—hoarding—all were playing their part. He thought of Amal's well-stacked godowns in Radhikapur. He could see in his mind's eye the little emaciated peasant boy and his bewildered family on a city

pavement, the little lad run over by a lorry loaded with wheat, and a child's blood on the streets. Didn't Bejoy say that it was no ordinary war, it was the epoch's end, the great change-over of the twentieth century? Didn't he say that after it all would come the great new order? Kanai could only laugh to himself. The Atlantic Charter? Well, it was a long, long way from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean . . .

'I must go to the Blood Bank', Nepi said, 'I'll donate my blood. You must come with me, Kanoo-da'. He smiled, rather foolishly.

Neela's face lit up and she said, 'I'll come with you, too, Nepi, and give my blood'.

'That hefty fellow in the *bustee* could perhaps 'have been saved if blood serum was available', Nepi said sadly, 'I can't forget the stunned look on his wife's face, never!'

Kanai stood there alone as Neela and Nepi went upstairs. He stood there and thought. Yes, inspite of everything, man must live. They had many taints, but men had greatness also in them. Kanai had no doubts about it, for that very day he had met and talked to old Mejababu. There must be some element in every human being that entitled him to being cherished and sustained. Kanai had made up his mind, he would do all he could to save humanity. . . He would donate his blood with Nepi and Neela. But wasn't his blood tainted? Didn't microbes pollute every drop of it? Did he have the right to serve his fellowmen even with his heart's blood? How would he give it then, he wondered. And he felt suddenly determined that he must have his blood tested, he must purge all poison out of his system. He must be among those who were whole, whole of body and mind, transmitting untainted life to ever newer generations. He looked for a moment in Neela's direction, looked at her with a spontaneous move-

ment. His bright eyes gave her a start. 'What is it, Kanaibabu?', she asked, in genuine concern. Kanai in his turn seemed to start at the sound of her voice, nodded without thought and went out the next moment. It was just about half-past six, and the clinic was not closed. He would have a blood test and would ask for injections if they were needed to eliminate all taint. He wanted, ever so keenly, to make a new man of himself. He would give his blood, first of all, to the service of the wounded. For several generations his forbears had fattened on the poor man's miseries and torn away his morsel from his hungry mouth. He would try to make amends, he would earmark his donated blood for the poor and the helpless who were maimed and mangled by raids like what had happened the night before.

(XXII)

The night of December the twenty-first was drawing to a close.

'*Didi! Didi!*' Nepi called out excitedly. Neela was already awake, the sound of the air-raid warning had shaken her sleeping nerves. She got up, the daze of slumber still in her eyes. The siren went on sounding, repeating its creepy crescendo. It was as if the city's soul had suddenly heard the wings of murderous birds of prey hovering overhead, and in its choking fear cried plaintively in a weird, drawn-out note.

Nepi's eyes were shining in excitement. 'Get up, *Didi*, it's the alert.' Neela smiled, her eyes no longer sleepy.

Outside the room, steps could be heard, for Bejoy had come to the door, with Shasthi behind him. He had a first-aid box in one hand and some papers and a pen in

another ; probably he had been stopped midway in his writing. The servant had several rugs on his shoulder and a bed-roll under his arm. 'Let's all go down', Bejoy said.

'Where do we go?' Neela asked with a smile.

'Where could we? But the little space under the stairs is a real good shelter', Bejoy smiled back. 'It'll add another roof to our heads.'

'Then you better take your umbrella also', Neela rejoined, 'It'll be an additional protection'.

'That's a good one', said Bejoy. 'Look here, Shasthi, tomorrow you bring down from the terrace the large table for which we have no room elsewhere and put it under the stairs. We shall have another floor, in that case.'

The alert had stopped. Suddenly one heard distant noises "Zoom—Zoom—Zoom." Possibly it was the sound of explosions somewhere.

Bejoy held court in quite a style in the cramped space under the stairs. Nepi sat without a word. Shasthi leant back on the wall comfortably. Neela kept quiet also, in that atmosphere of expectant stillness, straining to listen to the buzz of planes and the sound of explosions.

From the flat on the other side of the house, could be heard voices. 'Sit down quietly, Moni, don't tremble so. There's no fear', someone was saying.

A male voice, heavy and yet subdued, the voice perhaps of the head of the family, was then heard. 'Take the name of goddess Durga, say it over and over again, intently, and all danger will pass'.

'We're hungry', Bejoy blurted out. 'What a pity that we've got nothing to eat here'.

'What'd be the time now?' Neela suddenly asked.

'The siren sounded at 3-25. You can't blame me if I'm hungry. I'm sure you are too'.

'Why must you be sure?' Neela laughed.

'Well, because you are asking the time. You want to judge the rights and wrongs of feeling hungry at this hour, don't you?'

This time Neela laughed quite loudly.

Somebody had already begun to snore, however. Bejoy lit his torch to find out. Who could it be but his trusty Shasthi, sleeping unworried, his back to the wall?

Bejoy put out the torch and spoke to Neela. 'A. R. P. people tell us to play the gramophone during alert. Well we haven't any. But why don't you give us a song?'

'Song?' Neela smiled.

'Or even better, a ghost story. That blighter Kanai is at work, unfortunately. He tells ghost stories so well. A pity!'

A sudden buzz of alarm came from the direction of the adjoining flat. 'Moni! Moni!' Someone was saying. 'Whatever is the matter?' 'Moni seems to have fainted!' 'Let's have a light—quick!' 'Bring a torch—a torch. Don't put on the light'. 'Moni! Moni!' 'Some water here, quick! Where's the jug?' 'Ah, you haven't brought the jug. I knew you were a crowd of idiots, and the most idiotic of you all is that miserable wench.'

Possibly it was the lady addressed so politely who was saying in a quite and eager voice, 'Moni! My little Moni!'

'Here's the water', someone said. 'Move out of the way mother. I'm sprinkling it on Moni's face.'

Bejoy lit his torch, took out a phial of smelling salt and moved towards the door. 'You come along with me, Neela.'

It was just then that the "All Clear" sounded—a long-drawn-out cry of relief emitted by the stricken city.

'There's no fear now. Look, Moni's opened his eyes. There's no fear, Moni. It's the "All Clear".'

'Suresh Babu! Suresh Babu!' Bejoy called out from the other side. 'How's Moni? D'you want any help?'

'No, thank you so much. The child got frightened, that's all. He's all right now.'

'Moni's a very small boy, I guess?' Neela asked.

'Oh, you've just arrived. Stay a few days longer and then you'll see our Monichandra. Quite a five-year old Bengali brave!', Bejoy laughed. 'He is naughty and yet so afraid of things. Sometimes he asks me or Shasthi to stand near the stairs when he goes up after dusk—he's so frightened when it's dark.'

Neela thought of her elder brother's little son. He was six, not naughty, but quiet and timid. His father also was very quiet and timid, and his mother was almost an invalid. So it was no wonder that he grew in that fashion. Neela thought also of her own father, how he knew her ways and yet had suddenly distrusted her, and in the pride of paternity had hurt her self-esteem and reflected on her character. She had always been so touchy, and that was why till then she had given no thought to her family. But at that moment, hearing what went on in the flat next door and of the fainting child, she felt on a sudden a wave of affection and pity for her own people, affection tinged with fear. How were they all, she wondered. . .

Bejoy interrupted her thoughts, 'Why wait here, Neela? It's only about four o'clock. There'll be a lot of time for sleep yet.'

Neela lay on the bed but could not sleep. Over and over again she thought of her people—of the little nephew, of her father and mother, of her brother and sister-in-law. She worried herself more and more as she recalled the



occasions when one or the other of them had got ill on account of sudden excitement and nervous fear. She felt even tears surging up involuntarily in her eyes. 'Nepil' she called, quietly.

There was no reply. Perhaps Nepi was fast asleep. Bejoy-da, too, must have gone to sleep, or he would have answered instead. She could hear Shasthi snoring. No sound came from the other flat. Obviously, everybody slept soundly.

She would go home the next morning, she decided. And she would take Nepi along with her.

December the twenty-second. It was nearly half-past eight when Neela got up in the morning. For quite some time after the "All Clear" sounded, she could not go to sleep, and it was only towards dawn that she fell into a belated slumber. Perhaps her thoughts, so long uneasy, had found in the early hours of the morning some solace, some reassurance. She had been worrying about her home. And she had overcome many a tussle in her mind over her injured feelings and her grief at the treatment she had received, and decided that all would be well and the unhappy episode would end if only she could go back home in the morning. This had comforted her into sleep and now she had got up late. Bejoy sat out in the verandah, presiding over the tea; even Kanai was back from night work. Bejoy was reading something out to Kanai; probably he had written it the night before. Neela remembered he had some sheets of paper in his hand when the alert sounded. From the kitchen could be heard the noise of Shasthi getting on with the cooking. She felt rather ashamed. She had crossed straight from her studies to a job, but till only the day before yesterday she had helped her mother in house-

work early in the morning. She had actually worked in the kitchen, and not merely dallied with sewing or similar fashionable ways of spending one's time. Getting up late, therefore, made her feel quite miserable. She went for a hurried wash, and when she came back, Bejoy welcomed her. 'Good morning', he said, 'You please join our circle. I was reading an article I wrote last night—you'll hear the last paragraphs, and if you want to, you can read the earlier ones later.'

It was a political article, a piquant commentary on Premier Churchill's bombast that he had not assumed office to liquidate the British empire.

'Where's Nepi?' she asked, when Bejoy finished reading.

'Nepi? He left almost when it was dawn.'

'I see', Neela sounded quite cheerless.

'He'll be back presently, I guess. He's gone to the Welfare Committee office to find out all the news. I've been asked to keep Kanai from vanishing again. Nepi'll take him to the Blood Bank. I hear you're also going to donate your blood?'

'Yes, I had told him so', Neela said, drily.

'Why don't you sit down?' Bejoy told her. 'Have some tea, Kanai; let me have the pot, please.'

Kanai was obviously worried about something. He seemed to wake up at Bejoy's summons and said hastily, 'Let me pour out the tea'.

'I'll make it myself, thank you', said Neela.

'Kanai-Chandra, aren't you giving your blood?' Bejoy asked.

There was a suspicion of banter in Bejoy's voice and Neela asked him, 'Do you think it either wrong or laughable, Bejoy-da?'

'Not at all. I've given mine already. But d'you know what? This mention of the Blood Bank recalls to me a bank we once set up. None of the depositors had an income of more than fifty rupees a month; so naturally, by the time the bank could grow its depositors themselves collapsed. We're a semi-starved people; look at our eyes, they are yellowish, bloodless. I am reminded of the fifty-rupee capitalists behind our old bank when I think of the donors to the present Blood Bank.' Bejoy laughed as he spoke, but presently his tone became grave. 'And yet we've got to live and save lives. When I see Nepi I feel like going to donate some blood and earmark it for him if he happens to be injured.'

Kanai still with his pre-occupied air, got up. 'I'm not very well, Bejoy-da', he said, 'I think I'll have a bath and lie down for a while.' He had been worrying a lot since the night before. He was most awfully anxious about the kind of report on his blood which he was going to get from the clinic run by a doctor friend of his father's. He was Sukhamoy Chakravarti's eldest great-grandson, and it seemed more than likely that the hereditary taint would be in his blood.

Neela and Bejoy went out, one after the other. Nepi had not yet come back. Kanai lay on the bed, but could not sleep. He dozed from time to time and saw frightening dreams. Once he imagined the doctor giving him the blood report and saying gravely, 'Ten by ten'. He shuddered and got up to realise it was a dream. Another time he saw Neela reading the blood report. 'No—No, please don't,' he cried in his sleep and woke up at once.

His uneasy repose was disturbed by Shasthi who

roused him. 'There's a man at the door, sir, with a letter—for you or for my master.'

It was a man from up-country who lived near Gunada Babu's residence. He brought a chit. 'The police are here, searching the premises. Probably I shall be arrested—"Defence of India"! I am just sending you the news.'

Kanai hurried towards Gunada Babu's house, but when he reached, his friend was being led into the police van. He was not alone, there were several other political workers also. Gunada smiled at Kanai and stepped into the van.

Kanai stood there in silent indignation.

Gunada, whom he had come to know and to love in the newspaper office, had a militant revolutionary past. But of late, and especially since the days of the August movement, he had as good as retired into his shell, his sensitive soul was in torment. Perhaps, however, the police remembered his past and could not be happy till they put him behind bars. And those others whom Kanai had seen in the police van were men of Gunada's stamp, the very flower of the Bengal earth.

He looked up and saw Gunada's wife at the window. She looked a figure carved out of stone, her veil had dropped off and she did not care, her eyes were rigid but expressed neither grief nor despair.

The messenger who had been to Kanai's place ran a betel shop in front of Gunada's residence and had often been helped by him. He took Kanai inside the house.

Gunada's wife said, 'So you are Kanai Babu? My husband has told me a lot about you.'

Kanai could not make up his mind what to say.

She spoke again. 'Here's a letter he has left—for the office. He wanted me to send it through either you or Bejoy Babu.'

He took the letter and said quietly, 'I'll bring Bejoy-da along to see you either this evening or tomorrow morning.'

'But the letter should read the office as soon as possible.'

This was a clear hint, and Kanai did not stay any longer. As he came out of the house, he looked back and again he saw Gunada's wife in the same pose, a sort of a hard, unfeeling stare had come back to her eyes.

For a moment Kanai thought of all those who were Gunada's companions in the police van. Possibly in their homes were their mothers, sisters, wives, and in their eyes was the same stern stare, the iron had entered their souls.

He drew a deep breath and hurried on. He went first to his office and delivered the letter. Then he took a tram back, but he was so worried he got off midway and walked up to the clinic. The report on his blood was to have been ready some time that day.

Towards evening Neela was returning from her office.

There were rumours that fascist planes had dropped pamphlets somewhere, and on the cover was a picture of the warship "Prince of Wales" sunk off Singapore. Some were saying that in the pamphlet were pictures of the Japanese emperor and of Tojo; others said there were cartoons of Churchill in distress. Nobody had seen the pamphlets, but everybody seemed to have heard from an eye-witness! And whatever the artistic embellishments of the pamphlet, it said one thing clearly, according to reports—"Keep away from Calcutta".

Prize rumour-mongers were speaking of Calcutta to be razed to the ground between Christmas and New Year's Day. Even when people did not believe, they fell in the

grip of fear. And panicky evacuation was fortifying itself with pseudo-arguments.

Enormous crowds surged in Howrah and Sealdah railway stations. The platforms showed not an inch of bare space. People sat like flies with their children and their luggage, huddled nearer one another. At the collapsible gate which was the platform entrance there were European soldiers to keep order, apart from the usual railway staff. The porters charged fantastic prices, they asked for and even got five, ten, twenty, even fifty rupees. The rich man could get his luggage put into the carriage, but all the rest sat disconsolate. Train after train left with their record load ; many would fight their way in, but more waited dismally on the platform. There was a din beyond words. Every minute taxis, hackney carriages, rickshaws, overcrowded buses, were arriving to unload their fare. Howrah Bridge was like a sea of human heads. Upcountrymen were hurrying back home ; Marwaris wended towards Marwar. The rich men went off to Madhupur, Deoghar, Simultala, Benares ; middle-class clerks evacuated their families to Navadwip, Katwa, Burdwan, Bolepur, Nalhati. People left whatever they had in their own or rented houses, left their furniture and all that was not easily portable, and thought only of saving their skin. When there is a wood fire, birds and beasts and insects run for their lives ; it was rather in that demented fashion that men seemed to be rushing away from Calcutta. Those who did not go felt deeply perturbed, the fear in their souls accentuated by anxiety, ready, it seemed, when things were darker, to run like mad, forgetting the bonds of decency that kept them in leash. Offices were closed exactly at four, and the employees were going back home, with hurried footsteps, like water moving downstream. They looked up

at the sky, in consternation. The evening light was growing dimmer, and on the eastern sky the moon was already visible.

Getting off the tram, Neela remembered that she had thought of going home to find out how everybody was, and had then forgotten all about it.

There was none but Shasthi in Bejoy's flat. Bejoy was at work ; and Kanai had gone out after the midday meal and had not returned since. A messenger had come from Bejoy with an unsealed letter for Kanai. Shasthi did not know what to do about it, and was relieved to see Neela back from work. 'Please see what master wants in this letter, *didimani*', he said to her.

Neela hesitated for a moment, then took the letter and read it. Bejoy had asked Kanai to report at once at the office. Gunada-Babu, arrested in the morning under the Defence of India Rules, had been the paper's night editor. at the time of his arrest, he had sent a note to his office, in which he put down what he thought of his colleagues and had particularly commended Kanai's sense of duty and powers of quick and efficient translation. The authorities had decided to put Kanai in charge of the editorial department at night for fifteen days and to see how he fared. He would be confirmed in his position if he gave satisfaction.

Neela wrote back to say that Kanai was not there, but would be informed as soon as he arrived.

'Have you had your tea, *didimani*?' Shasthi asked her. It was just then that Nepi arrived. He looked tired out, his hair was untidy, possibly he had not found time for a bath and also for food. 'No', she said to Shasthi, 'both of us want some tea very badly'.

The good servant scratched his head. 'I have put on the rice already, it's being boiled', he said apologetically.

'In that case', she said, 'you get some tea from the restaurant'. She gave him a four-anna piece, two annas for tea and two annas for some sweets.

When she came out of the bath, she saw Nepi sitting listlessly just where he was. 'Go and have a wash, Nepi', she told him.

• "They arrested Gunada-da?' he said, in a very sad voice.

Neela could not reply.

'Gunada-da was in no kind of politics, these days', he added.

'Don't brood so, brother. Go and have a wash. Shasthi is bringing us some tea, and you'd want it hot . . . One moment, let me see if the rice needs some water.'

It did. She went into the kitchen and poured some water into the rice-bowl. She noticed how untidy the kitchen was. And yet, only the day before, she had had a meal there, and it was spotless. Geeta was then looking after it, and that was why. She must tell Shasthi off, he needed a talking-to badly.

The tea came, and Neela spoke sharply to Shasthi, 'You've made the kitchen so untidy. It was so different when Geeta was here.'

Shasthi, nothing daunted, gave a smile. 'She's a very nice girl, Geeta is indeed a nice girl,' he said, and added, 'D'you know she came today for while?'

'Did Kanai-babu go out with her, then?'

'Oh no! Kanai-babu went out immediately after dinner. Geeta came in the afternoon. Master also wasn't at home, then, and she went back. She had brought another girl with her—she, too, was a nurse.'

Nepi came and sat down.



Neela sipped the tea and asked him, 'You haven't met those soldiers since, have you?'

'No. But I guess if we go Esplanade way, we might meet them. That night you left so abruptly that we couldn't exchange addresses.'

Neela was silent for a while and then picked up Kanai's letter. 'Kanai-babu's getting a lift', she smiled.

'I don't see why Kanai-da's always so morose. And yet he has such gifts—how well he speaks!'

Neela smiled again. Her brother did not know how at college Kanai was the subject of interminable discussion. None could ever imagine, she thought, that Kanai would get entangled with Geeta in the way he seemed to have done. Now he was going to get a lift . . . Her thoughts veered round suddenly towards something which Kanai had said the day before. 'I say, Nepi', she asked, 'have you ever been to Kanai-babu's place?'

'Oh yes. It's a big house they've got, but it's dilapidated now. At one time his people were the real bourgeois type, you know.'

'D'you know if Kanai-babu's parents suffer from—well, insanity?'

'I don't know for sure, but I think it isn't insanity, it's a sort of eccentricity. They're all rather funny, you know. But you should see the girls of their family—they're kept rigidly secluded, but they are so pretty!'

Neela began laughing, causelessly, it seemed.

'Why do you laugh?' Nepi asked. But she asked back, still laughing, 'Do they put a *burkha* (veil) over their face?' 'Who?' 'The women in Kanai-Babu's family, you nitwit', she teased him.

Shasthi came up and said, 'Where's Kanai-babu gone to, *didimani*? The food's ready, and he's to go to work'.

Neela looked up at the time-piece on the table. Yes, it was nearly nine. Where on earth had Kanai gone to? She began to be worried.

Nepi stood out on the verandah, anxiously awaiting Kanai's return.

Everyone was in bed. Kanai had not returned. Nor had Bejoy.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door. Neela sat up on her bed. 'Nepi! Nepi!' she called.

The tired lad was deep in sleep.

Neela came out on the verandah. She leant forward and asked, 'Who is it? Kanai-Babu?'

'Yes'.

'Where have you been so long, Kanai-babu? There was a messenger for you from the office. And the police have arrested Gunada-da. I'm coming in a minute'.

She began to climb down the stairs, when suddenly sounded sharply the air-raid siren, tearing as it were through the city'soul. Neela stood transfixed for moment, then rushed down and opened the door. But there was nobody there. The road was flooded with moonlight, and yet Kanai was nowhere to be seen. Neela went down to the street and called out, 'Kanai-babu! Kanai-babu!'

There was no reply. The alert had not still ceased sounding. Most of the houses had their doors and windows shut already; the few that were open were now being shut in noisy hurry. The glimmer of lights visible through the shutters was no longer to be seen. There was not a soul in the street. Neela felt very anxious and called out again, 'Kanai-babu!'

Nepi was roused from sleep by the alert. He had come down and was calling his sister, '*Didi!* where are you?'

Neela looked back and said, 'I can't see where Kanai-babu's gone to. He came and went away.'

It was now Nepi's turn to come out and shout, 'Kanai-da! Kanai-da!'

Kanai had gone, walked away as fast as he could. The sound of the siren had sent a queer thrill into his excited nerves. Perhaps, temporarily, he had gone out of his mind. He wanted to be where Japanese planes were going to rain death, to put his head right under a bomb! Since the evening he had sat in a park, in a near-demented state of mind. From there he had gone to the riverside, to commit suicide.

Earlier, on his way back from office, he had stopped at the clinic run by his father's friend. He was so impatient to hear what the report was like that he could not return home. He was told the report would be ready at six in the evening. Kanai wandered aimlessly and changed trams several times and went back to the clinic at half-past three. The doctor had smiled, and said, 'The report isn't ready yet. You'll have to wait for some time.'

He sat down and picked up a medical treatise. He read of the hated disease, how it was disseminated from generation to generation. What horrid prospects it pictured for him! He might go blind, or deaf, his mind might get blurred, he might be a paralytic or a lunatic! . . .

'You're a student of science', the doctor told him, 'and I'm so glad you've realised the importance of this blood-test. You see, your father and I were at school together. I've been to your place, so often, in those days. I remember your father's younger uncle going mad rather suddenly. People used to say, then, that it was due to a curse on old Sukhamoy, a curse inherited from another birth! At any rate that was what the deity *Tarakeswar* was said to have

revealed! . . . Well, I qualified to be a doctor later on, and when I assisted Dr. Bose who treated your grandfather at the time of his death, I began to understand . . . Your poor father had started losing his teeth, then. He was only about twentythree at the time. I told him to have a blood test. He did, but he didn't take a course of injections, he was afraid . . . You're a good lad. You've done the right thing. If there's any taint in your blood, have a course of injections. Be a new man, and let your children be healthy and strong . . .'

Kanai did not say a word, he went on turning page after page of the book. Would men ever come to have taintless blood? In a society weighted by inequality, hunger was the prime disease—hunger for food, for human flesh. There are some who have a surfeit of food to eat, but they are goaded by the passion for female flesh and purchase women who sell their bodies in exchange for food . . . And poison generates in this pathetic gambol of unbridled lust. Hungry and oppressed, people disseminate this poison; in their deprivation, their lack of sense, and their unhealthy aberrations of instinct, they become like reptiles in the dark . . . Perhaps at one time religion played a dominant part in our culture, our way of life; men were then lured by hopes of another life where virtue would be rewarded; society was still in the feudal stage, a prince would renounce the world and yearn for *Nirvana*, a King would give away all he had and put on the mendicant's attire. Till the other day, in India, it was from this class of people, the devotees of renunciation, that poets and prophets, and even leaders of society were drawn. Things had changed in a commercialised society. Religious books were not so much read as sold at a profit; in temples there were few real worshippers, but many parasitic priests; men hardly dreamt

of the road to heaven, for nobody called tenders for the construction of a staircase there! . . .

The doctor spoke, interrupting Kanai's thoughts. 'A friend of mine once asked me to try and see if you would marry his daughter. He's a big man and was looking out for a good lad. But I couldn't mention it to your father, knowing what I did.'

An assistant doctor now brought him the blood report. He looked intent, surprise stamped on his features. 'Strange!', he said and got up at once. 'I'll have another look and see if it's alright.'

In a little while he returned, smiling broadly. 'Congratulations, Kanai! Your blood is O.K.—the report is quite clear about it.'

So his blood was without taint? Kanai looked pale as a ghost, mechanically he took the report and put it in his pocket. He could not utter another word. Only the doctor's hushed voice reached his ears as he left. 'It's strange!' the doctor had said.

"Strange!" "Strange!" "Strange!" He seemed to hear no other word. So the poison that had got into the blood and bones of his people, his father and his uncles, his brothers and sisters and cousins, the poison had not invaded his system! It was strange—ever so strange!

In that case—in that case, he wondered, was he really a Chakravarti? Could he ever know? . . .

### (XXIII)

Kanai felt all of a tremble; the earth seemed to quiver under foot, the city lights seemed to be flickering violently. Who was he going to break this news to? He went and sat for a while in a park. Then he went to the riverside.

Over and over again thoughts of suicide came to his mind. He had a long tussle before he could keep himself in check.

Did it matter if he was not a Chakravarti? Did it matter in the least if he had no ancestral introduction? He belonged to no clan, wore no surname; he was a human being, and that was his highest title. He recalled the mythological story of the great *Karna*, and he thought of that other mighty hero of humanity whose birthday fell only three days ahead, on the twentyfifth of December. He remembered having told Neela once that he would relate to her the hidden chapters of his life. Wasn't this his secret—the unspoken reality of his life and make-up? Surely he should tell her all about it and find out what her reactions were? He would then see the limits of her progressive outlook. Hadn't she refused the barriers of race and colour and dreamt of allying her life with that of foreigners? Hadn't she even left the shelter her parents provided her, for the sake of her ideas? Well, Kanai will be testing her, he will see for himself if she would stretch a friendly hand towards him when she heard of his true lineage.

He went back home, in a spirit of determination. But when Neela answered his knock, he felt a sort of shamed hesitancy overpowering him. How was he going to have the face to tell her all about it? How would he begin?—And wouldn't Neela turn away? . . . It was just then that the siren sounded.

Japanese bombers were rushing to rain death from the skies. He hurried away, hoping he would meet with his release.

The streets of the great city were flooded over with gorgeous moonlight. Earth and sky seemed linked in a luminous festival. It was full-moon night, the whole round

disk illuminated, only there seemed a faint white layer of mist midway between earth and sky. Kanai was walking fast, his ears on the alert for the noise of planes; from time to time he was looking up at the sky, scanning it for fast-moving red-blue-and-white light points.

'Who are you, please? Who are you?' An A.R.P. official barred his way. 'Oh, it's you, Kanai-da', he said, when Kanai halted. 'But why are you here?' 'I can't quite recognise you', Kanai answered. 'I'm Sambhu—you know all our group—Sambhu, Jagu, Bishnu, Bidyut and the others'.

They all belonged to the locality, knew Kanai and liked him. They were working on the A.R.P.

'You can't go anywhere now', he said, and pretty nearly dragged him.

"Let me go home, then", Kanai said, weakly.

'No, I can't. Besides, if I do, others will stop you on the way. Don't you realise the raid may start any moment?'

He took Kanai inside their "Assembly Point". Staff Officer Narayan Bose sat there, in Khaki, a leather strap on his chest, like a *Brahmin's* 'sacred thread', fastened on to a belt round the waist. He sat there, looking very grave.

He knew Kanai quite well. 'You here?' he asked in surprise.

'He was going home—at this hour', Sambhu answered. 'I dragged him in here.'

'I see. You can't go out now, Kanai Babu'.

Somebody got off a bicycle, leant it against the wall outside, walked in and gave Bose a smart salute. 'You're late', Bose told him. 'Yes, sir, I'm sorry'. 'Keep yourselves in readiness—with your bikes'.

The lad saluted again and went off. He was in the messenger service. Their job was to run round collecting

information and sending it on, even during the raid, if the telephone went wrong.

The telephone bell rang. Except A.R.P. telephones, the entire telephone service had been stopped. Bose picked up the receiver. 'Hallo!'

'Warden No. 5?'

'Report?'

'Is everything alright in your post?'

'That's all right'. He put down the receiver.

Two cyclists then walked in, their heavy shoes crunching. They went up to Bose, saluted him and said, 'We had gone to work before the alert. We are reporting now. We couldn't be earlier.'

'Good'.

One of them added: 'Some street lamps were still burning, Jagu and I put them out.'

'Good'.

He saluted and went into the other room.

'Sambhu!' Bose called. 'Yes, *Bardada?*' "There's some tea in the flask. Why not pour out some? Kanai Babu looks rather run down, it'll buck him up.'

Sambhu promptly produced two enamelled mugs, poured the tea, and pushed them towards Kanai and Bose.

'You don't smoke, do you?' Bose asked Kanai and put a cigarette in his mouth. He was lighting a match when he got suddenly alert. 'That's a plane, I'm sure', he said, listening.

Everyone sat up. Sambhu went out to see what was happening.

From somewhere far up in the sky could be heard a faint rumble. 'D'you hear it?' Bose asked. 'Yes', Kanai replied.

In an instant the noise became distinct and loud.



Bose stood up in excitement. He stepped up to the door, Kanai following him.

'One must have come down very near us'.

Just then a flash, as of lightning, tore through the sky. 'Parachute flare', Bose said.

Immediately, there was an explosion. There was yet another flash, followed by another explosion. There were thuds, not so loud as menacing. 'Sambhu!' Bose called.

There was a parachute flare again and the inevitable thud to follow.

'Yes, sir!' Sambhu replied.

Kanai felt the blood coursing excitedly in his veins. He wanted to get to work with the rest of them, he could not think of anything else.

In that very moment there was a blinding flash of light and simultaneously a terrific din. All about them seemed to tremble violently.

'High explosive. Perhaps the plane's just ahead of us'.

Another flash and the din—but not so loud this time. The plane sounded like rushing away.

'There'll be reports tonight, Sambhu, I'm sure', Bose said.

'I think so, too, sir'.

In a little while the telephone rang. Bose exchanged a meaning glance with Sambhu. 'Hallo!', he picked up the receiver.

Everyone looked eagerly at Bose's face. He was flushed with excitement, his eyes afire.

'Any report?'

'No report?'

'Sector Number?'

'Four'.

'Good'.

He had hardly put down the receiver, when it rang again.

'Report! What's it?'

'Sector nine, incident? Bombs on a *bazaar* (Market)?'

'Are you the warden?'

'So you're going there? Good. Ring up the ambulance.'

The noise of more planes could be heard; a number seemed to be moving together. All looked up anxiously.

'They must be our fighter planes', Bose said, 'They're chasing the enemy.'

A plane circled overhead—a reconnoitring plane making sure if the enemy lurked still.

Kanai was quite keyed up now. His *ennui* had disappeared.

The 'All Clear' soon sounded, its long-drawn-out notes spread all over.

Bose looked at his watch, and picked up the telephone receiver. 'I'll ring up ambulance, to make sure. What d'you say?' he asked Sambhu.

'Hadn't you better ring up the Warden first and verify what has happened?' Sambhu answered.

'Hallo! Put me on to—. Yes, please.'

'Hallo! Warden No. 5? The bazaar has been raided, I hear. Was it high explosives?. . . No. In that case?. . . How are the people there?. . . The bazaar gate was locked?. . . I see . . . Yes, I'm coming at once.'

He put down the receiver, took it up again and wanted another connection.

'Hallo! Staff Officer,—area, speaking, Ambulance . . . Yes, incidents. Near ———Market. . . Oh, you've got news of it already? Please send at least four cars . . . already sent? Thanks so much.'

Bose now spoke to Sambhu, 'The ambulance cars have gone. You bring the others. I'm going in my car.'

'You can go home now, Kanai-Babu', he added, 'I must be off.'

'Are you going to the scene of the incident?' Kanai asked him.

'Yes', Bose answered as he made a move.

'Could I come with you, please?'

'Well', Bose hesitated. 'Alright, come along. You might be of use'.

He got into the car and started it. They sped through the deserted early-morning streets.

The warden of the sub-area stood at the gate of the market, with his three assistants. One could not guess from the outside what damage had been done to the market. Nothing had happened to the row of two-storeyed shops which had their frontage on the road. Bombs had dropped on the tin-shed over the vegetable stalls. The groans of the wounded could be heard from there. The collapsible gate at the market entrance had been locked, and had to be broken open.

It was pitch dark inside. The going was very rough, and it looked as if bricks and stones were scattered all over the place. They were not all bricks and stone, however; there were potatoes and brinjal and coconuts strewn everywhere. Men lay groaning, here and there; a few made no sound, maybe they were dead. A dull moan haunted the place, as it were. Bose lit his torch, and they saw a long trickle of blood.

He threw the torch light towards the tin-sheds. One was twisted beyond all shape, and drooped in a weird slant. Some tin-plates had been blasted away to a distance, and the angle-iron of the framework looked like serpents writhing in death-agony.

'We want some lanterns', Bose said to one of his men. 'Take the car and fetch them'.

Kanai took a torch in his hand and moved towards the stricken men. Some of the injured, anticipating first aid, were beginning to make an effort to sit up. Kanai once felt as if he had stepped on something soft and long. He flashed his torch and shuddered to see it was part of an arm severed from the body. There was no time to waste on gruesome sights. He moved on towards a man who was groaning in pain, found he had heavy head and shoulder injuries and was still unconscious. Kanai sat beside the poor fellow, trying to help.

A motor car drew up outside and sounded its horn. 'It's the ambulance', Bose said.

Ambulance workers hurried in, lantern in hand. The work started in right earnest. First aid was administered to most of the injured who were then taken to hospital. A few cars had also been sent from the headquarters of the committee that arranged the funeral of the impecunious dead.

Kanai worked away. 'You're working like a giant,' Bose smiled his approbation.

Kanai did not return the smile, he resumed the work without another word. It seemed that all on a sudden his life had taken a different turn. He had been scheming suicide all the day, and now life was breathing into his ear the message of work and fulfilment. He felt no qualms, he was filled with a strange happiness.

Someone came in, wearing military boots, a high-powered torch in his hand. Bose and the other A. R. P. workers gave him a salute. He was the Assistant Controller of the A. R. P.

Kanai went on with his work.

'Is the identification of the victims proceeding properly?' the Assistant Controller asked.

'We are doing all we can, sir', Bose replied. 'We haven't been able to identify two of the dead, though'.

For once Kanai stopped his work and looked at the rest of them. What identification did the dead require? He started again, but there came to his mind suddenly Rabindranath's lines:

*'—You aren't beyond the pale, brother,*

*'You're a Brahmin of Brahmins, your lineage's the best.'*

. . . Who was that lad he saw picking his way through the place, moving stealthily? Kanai went up and caught him, quite some small coin in his palm. It was Hiren, Geeta's brother, trying to rob the dead and dying! He turned pale, and tried his best to run away, but Kanai gripped him too hard and dragged him towards Bose. 'This little chap's like a brother to me', he said, 'and he has come here to serve. Here, Hiren, give me those coins, I'll deposit them with our officer.'

'I say, Bose, why not take this lad into your staff?' Kanai added.

'We want *you* before that.' Bose said with a smile.

'Mr. Bose!' It was the Assistant Controller calling.

'Yes, sir.'

'I have to be off to ——area.'

'Any incidents there, sir?'

'Yes. A bustee in ——street has been bombed, and right alongside it was a very old house—perhaps you've heard of it, it was Sukhamoy Chakravarti's mansion. Half of it has collapsed, I hear.'

'The house of the Chakravartis in ——street?' Kanai repeated, straightening himself.

'Kanai-Babu!' Bose addressed him, his face quite pale.

Quietly and firmly Kanai answered, 'Yes, I must go and have a look'.

'You can go in the Rai Bahadur's car, I'm sure', Bose said. Then turning towards the Assistant Controller, he added, 'It's this gentleman's home, sir. If you take him over in your car——'

'Yes, of course. Please come in.'

Someone ran past the crowd. It was Hiren who had seen his chance of escape.

Kanai sat in the car and began to brood again. Could it be that Sukhamoy's mysterious mansion had at last collapsed? How was his own dilapidated grand-uncle? And the others in the family? His mother? His father, his brothers and sisters? . . .

#### (XXIV)

From early dawn on December the twentythird, panicky evacuation from Calcutta started. The scene was as pathetic as it was frightening. The 'lower' orders, deprived of all opportunities of education, who yet bear the main burden of social life, who work unremittingly from dawn to dusk for the merest pittance, who are far and away the most numerous group in society, seemed to be on a senseless mass migration. Life is to them such a precarious proposition that it is in itself a most precious possession, and they tried to cling to it, piteously. From age to age, whenever famines broke out, they had moved from place to place, taken to beggary, and if alms were unavailable, they had gone to the woods and managed somehow to contrive an existence. In times of pestilence, when they had not the means to secure facilities for medical treatment, they had had recourse to what seemed the only way out—to run away from the

scene. Revolutions had happened in history, and many a *coup d'etat*; but little change had happened to their lives. And in a kind of mass neurosis produced by age-long disappointment, consciously felt or unfelt, they thought only of escape as a remedy for their ills. So in an unending procession, there seemed to be filing out of town hordes of domestic servants, barbers, porters, and workers of all sorts. They did not wait for conveyances; they walked, with dour determination. Railway authorities arranged the maximum number of outgoing trains, but could not cope with the traffic by a very long chalk. People who could afford it were moving out of town in motor cars and lorries, in hackney carriages and rickshaws, bullock-carts and even in the peculiar kind of horse-drawn vehicles used normally as refuse-carts. The richer classes, hungering for life's luxuries even in their satiety and therefore the most frightened by a prospect of death, who buy with their gold another's blood to save their lives when their own blood does not suffice for the purpose—well, such people had a long tradition of leaving intrepidly for safer zones whenever there was famine or pestilence or more frightening still, a revolution. They want to keep their moneybags intact, and when all is over and power in the State is seized by the successful usurper, they come back, bowing low, and pay homage to newfangled authority. . . No wonder that they were well represented in the panicky procession. Among others who left were middle-class worthies whom Vishnusharma in his two-thousand-year-old *Panchatantra* had described as 'ready-witted'. His 'prognosticators' had run away long before, and the 'whatever-happens' group lingered everywhere. These last were not duly described by Vishnusharma, but that they lacked the means to behave otherwise is indubitable. So at least was Bejoy's view, and it was he who had ransacked

Vishnusharma's lore! Neela could not help smiling when he spoke in that vein, but in her heart there was a great sadness. There was another class of people, again, whose hopes were not coming true. They were weaklings with a conspiratorial turn of mind. They thought of fascist Japan as their deliverer, they expected freedom as a gift from Britain's enemy. They had forgotten that more than once in India's history such costly mistakes had been made and paid for. They had forgotten our past. . . .

Bejoy had gone out early in the morning. He wanted to find out where Kanai had got to, and then to make enquiries at Gunada-babu's house. Since Gunada had been arrested the day before, his wife and children had nobody to look after them.

Neela stood on the verandah, wrapt in thought. She was worried about Nepi who had gone to help the victims of the night's raid.

She had no reason to be pleased with Kanai and his recent ways, or, at any rate that was what she thought. But she was very much worried about him, ever since he had vanished from the door when the siren sounded the night of December 21. She resolved to go and see them, but every time something or other hindered her. She waited impatiently now for Nepi to come back, for she would send him home, she decided, the moment he returned. At any rate he could get their news from the grocer next door.

The winter day moved fast, and it was nearly time for her to get ready to go to work. She could wait no longer, took her meal and went off. She told herself that on her way back she would forget what had happened and go home once for the news she was so eager for. If her father refused even to receive her, she would see what to do about it later on.



She could not apply her mind to office work that day.

Her immediate boss was an elderly gentleman from upcountry. 'Aren't you well to-day, Miss Sen?' he asked her.

It seemed for no reason her eyes looked suddenly moist.

'Tell me, you aren't well, are you?' he insisted, gently.

Neela could find nothing to say in reply. After a while she said, 'A very near relation of mine left home about the time the siren sounded last night and hasn't turned up since'.

'Don't worry, Miss Sen. I'm sure when you go back home you'll see he has returned, unhurt.' He added, 'But if you're so anxious, why not go home now? I wouldn't mind.'

'No, please, no.' She stammered. 'Thanks so much all the same'. Neela felt rather ashamed of herself. There was no reason, she argued to herself, why she should worry so much about an impoverished aristocrat and an eccentric person like Kanai. She tried to sink herself in work, and did not once take her eyes off the files before her till it was closing time.

When the bell rang, however, to indicate cessation of the day's work, she hurried out of the building.

At the gate she saw James and Harold waiting for her to come out. They greeted her cheerfully. 'How are you, Miss Sen?'

Neela's eyebrows almost puckered. She did not seem particularly pleased to see them there. She tried not to show it and said, 'I'm fine, thanks ; how are you?'

'Why not let's all have some coffee together?' Harold put in.

'Thanks so much, but you'll please forgive me. I have so much to do tonight.' She said a hurried good-bye and moved on.

The streets were crowded, with people who were not so much walking as trying to run. The panic of the night before seemed to have cast a gloom over everybody's mind. So far there had been raids outside Calcutta, in the suburbs ; but it was different the night before. Bombs had dropped right inside the town and the sudden and terrific report of explosion on market tin-sheds had oveawhelled the population. Even in their homes they did not feel too safe, but at any rate there were their own people to stick together with. And the future looked so dismal that men could not console themselves that after all when they died their children would remain, and so have a taste of immortality even in death! "Let all of us live together or die together, if death must come"—such was roughly the thought which had come, it seemed, to so many. Or perhaps in the enveloping panic, they could not muster courage or feel at ease unless they could collect all their own people to cling to affectionately. So everybody looked as if they were running homewards. Bengalis, usually voluble, had grown quite dumb.

The tram turned round near Wellington Square. A crowd was coming out of the park, carrying banners and posters on which slogans were written. So even in that gloom there were men seeking the road to true freedom! . . .

The silence in the tram was broken at last. 'Why the hell don't they go home and be done with it?' A facetious passenger remarked, "They do seem to have some fun these days.'

'So *Shalya* is now to direct the chariot, and glow-worms crowd out the moon!' Another put in. 'How much more must one see these days? Don't these small fry try to make some noise?'

"They are friends of Russia, you know—Russo-Bengal!" A silly titter followed such fatuities.

The discussion went on, however. The sorrows of frustration found crude expression. It made Neela feel irremediably sad. She looked vaguely out of the window, seeing little. She got quite a shock when she noticed it was nearly a full moon and on a sudden the tarred road was flooded with an eerie light and looked as if it was an illuminated river. But it was Vivekananda Road. She realised with a start that she had left Keshab Sen Street far behind. Hadn't she decided that she would get off at Keshab Sen Street, go home and get all the news? In her absent-mindedness, she had again upset her plans. She sighed and got off the tram.

When she got back home nearly panting, for she had walked fast, she saw Nepi on the verandah and Bejoy stretched lazily on his bed. 'Come in, Neela,' Bejoy said, in an unusually quiet voice.

Neela could not quite make out what had happened. 'Bombs fell on Kanai's ancestral house last night', Bejoy added, 'and a portion of the building collapsed.' Neela could hear no more, all about her seemed in a mad swirl and she somehow clutched the table to keep her balance.

'Some of Kanai's relations have been killed', Bejoy went on. 'They've found the bodies of a very old and a middle-aged woman, and also of a young man. An old man who had been injured was sent to hospital. I was told that Kanai had gone there, but when I turned up I heard the old man was dead and Kanai had taken the corpse to the cremation ground. I went there, too, but he had already left.'

Nepi came from the verandah and stood silently by.

He was never very vocal and was expressing his deeply-felt sympathy that way.

'Nepi-Chandra', Bejoy now spoke in something like his usual vein. 'Ask Shasthi to get us some tea, please.' Nepi left the room.

'Where has Kanai-Babu gone to, Bejoy-da?' Neela spoke at last. 'Couldn't you find any clue?'

'No', Bejoy said slowly, 'I can't help thinking, Neela, that it's so callous of him not to realise that we would be worrying over him.'

Neela did not speak. She felt deeply hurt. Didn't Kanai once call her 'Comrade', and didn't he want to tell her about himself and his life's problems? And yet, when he was in such distress, he never thought of breathing a word to her?

'News travels somehow', Bejoy said, 'and Geeta, hearing it, came running here. She's gone only a little while. She was in a terrible state of nerves.'

'I'll be having a wash and shall come back presently', Neela said after a few moments.

'Yes, my dear', Bejoy seemed to wake up with a start. 'Yes, my dear. And don't be long, for I want you to come with me.'

'Where to?' Neela asked in some surprise.

'Well, there's no reason for fear,' Bejoy said with a smile. 'We shall be back before nine and I don't expect Jap planes would be so inconsiderate as to turn up earlier than that. I want you to come with me to Gunada-babu's house. I have to speak to his wife and find out how things are. It'll be easier if you are there too.'

Gunada-Babu's wife had known Bejoy a long time. She would cover up her head when she saw him, but would

speak to him without constraint. In the old days Gunada and Bejoy used to be in the same political camp, and Bejoy, a confirmed bachelor, would often visit Gunada and his wife and partake of one of the greatest pleasures of their married life, namely, the food cooked by her.

Neela got quite a surprise when she saw her. The vermilion symbol of wifehood seemed to blaze on her forehead, her complexion was unusually light ; she held herself so erect and her eyes looked so bright and determined that she commanded respect. 'Is Bejoy Babu any relation of yours?' She asked Neela.

'No', Neela replied, rather ill at ease. 'He's no relation, but a very great friend. I call him *Dada*'.

'I see. So you belong to his party, I expect?'

'Yes'.

'Well, what's the news you're bringing for me?'

'Bejoy-da told me to tell you that he has already spoken at the office about Gunada-da. They've paid up what was owing to him, and will let you have twentyfive rupees every month.'

'Twentyfive?' She repeated, a listless look creeping into her eyes.

'Bejoy-da tells me', Neela added, 'that he'll be arranging for ten more.'

'That is to say, he'll pay out of his own pocket?' Her voice sounded rather shrill.

Bejoy now spoke himself from outside the room, 'Have you any objection, *Bow-di* (elder brother's wife)?'

Gunada's wife pulled down her veil a little, and said slowly, 'Bejoy Babu, you and my husband don't belong to the same party these days, and people talk so about your party . . '

'Did Gunada-da believe in slanders against us?'

'No, he didn't.'

'In that case, *Bow-di*—' Bejoy pleaded.

There was a note of hesitancy in her voice, as she looked at Neela and said, 'All right, Bejoy Babu. I shall accept your help. And thank you very much.'

After a while Bejoy spoke again, 'You'll have to make an application also—about the tenancy.'

'No', she said, 'I don't think it'll be necessary, I'll manage somehow.'

'You don't know', Bejoy replied, 'You don't know what evil days are ahead of us. Famine's coming—'

'Well', she smiled, 'there must be people to die off in wars and famines. I'll be one of them.'

Bejoy and Neela took leave of her and walked back home. The moonlight streets were deserted. They did not exchange a word. In their minds was a gloom, which the recent conversation had made heavier still.

### (XXV)

December the twentyfourth.

The great city awoke in the morning, comparatively at ease, for the night had passed without incidents. It was not, of course, quite at ease; it seemed to feel like one who keeps watch by a dying man's bed and when somehow the night's dark vigil is over, remains in a kind of exhausted stupor, insensible even to worry. But the light of day proceeding apace was bringing fresh anxieties, for a sudden menace might at any moment loom on the horizon. Besides, it was Christmas eve, which the fascist foe might well single out with cruel irony for his depredation, and it was only the second night in the dark phase of the moon, when the moon rose late, but pretty nearly full-orbed.

Neela's father, Devaprasad, was pacing up and down the narrow verandah of his modest residence. He was at one time a thorough-going idealist, and had to suffer a great deal from contact with the sordid world of society. But he had not grown a cynic, as so many like him tended to be. His belief was in the kind of humanism which was widely held towards the end of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth. He had no hankering after money and sensual enjoyment ; he held the principles of morality he had learnt to cherish in the highest respect. But the shocks he received from his daughter and his younger son were too much even for his patience. What hurt him most of all was his fear that they had renounced what to his mind were moral principles. Hadn't even his Neela told him what was virtually a lie? 'I've asked two friends to the play,' was all she had said, but she had carefully omitted to say they were men-friends and were foreigners to boot. Surely, he writhed, she had broken the bonds of morality. She had disobeyed his command and left her home. Devaprasad had had the shock of his life from Neela's conduct.

He had known that Nepi also had left when that very night he had called him and got no response. He had not breathed a word about his going to a soul. Rather he wanted to say: 'I renounce you, son ; you're dead in my eyes. Never again come back to this house.'

It was neither easy nor natural for him to say the same thing about his daughter. He fancied himself to be a humanist who acknowledged without reservation the rights of man, but women in his ethics were to be treated either with the inordinate affection bestowed on children or like honoured goddesses. There could thus be no question of his right to protect and chastise, when necessary, his own

child. It was not that he was unaware of socialistic arguments about the equality of the sexes; he had given much thought to the matter, but he could never quite bring himself to accept it.

A bitter smile broke out on his lips as he paced up and down, brooding gloomily. So all his idealism had produced this result! His own daughter hob-nobbed with foreign soldiers! And they talked of socialism—communism in a colonial country! The "headless horror" of ghost stories worrying about having his hair dressed . . . .

No, he won't yield, he would feel no remorse. He had had a shock, but he had stood it, he would shed no tears.

For the last two days his wife had been weeping, silently but without respite. He knew it but had said nothing to her. The elder son had lost his job and looked more morose than ever. He was so ashamed that he would not even once go out of the house. The burden of the entire family had fallen on Devaprasad's shoulders; there was no way out for him, as in the scheme of a joint family his was the finally inescapable responsibility. Neela's salary had been a great help, but now the gap it had torn into the family finances had to be filled.

Often Devaprasad, worrying out his puny financial problems, would laugh at himself. Worrying about money, when a silver flood jingled at one end of the country like a roaring river in spate and at the other was a dreary desert of seemingly irreparable want! A dip in that overflowing river would make a man emerge with silver limbs. All his problems could be solved if he took one of the myriad war-time jobs. But—. He would laugh again. He recalled how Neela, arguing with him, would say, 'Rights are never anybody's gift, father; they've just got to be won.' How



he used to laugh when she plunged passionately into political argument!

'Would you be going out today?' His wife asked him.

'Yes, of course'. He replied, with a start. The shock had infused fresh vigour into Devaprasad's mind. He would perform his duty, the duty he owed his wife, children and grand-children. He dreamt no dreams of being able himself to see the dawn of a new bright day after all the present turmoil was over; he nursed no such hopes. But he knew he would live on in his descendants who, surely, some day, would be luckier than he.

At his door-step, as he was leaving for work, he met a man who ran a little betel shop across the road. 'What is it, Sheocharan?' he asked him.

'Please, sir, I want you to do me a favour.'

'Well, let's hear what it's about.'

'Would you, please, sir, let me keep in your house some of my things—a mirror and an almirah?'

'But why? Are you going home?'

Sheocharan sighed audibly. 'Yes, *Babujee*, what else could I do? The children at home are so frightened that they can't even eat. One day a street-urchin mimicked the siren and they fair got into a fit, sir. If things go on happening at this rate, sir, they'll die, I'm sure.'

Devaprasad tried to reckon if it was safe in such a panicky time to keep anybody else's property in deposit.

'I won't tell you a lie, sir', Sheocharan continued. 'We also have got the fright alright. Let's go home, and then, if God wills it, we'll come back again sometime.' He made a gesture of resignation.

The man suddenly gave a smile and went on, 'You see, sir, trade's been very good these days. I run the shop and my wife prepares fried stuff for sale. We're very poor

people, sir, we have nothing at all at home. And yet we're running home. . . Perhaps, sir, our fate's to die of hunger there.'

'Can't you keep your things somewhere else?' Deva-prasad asked him.

'No, sir, there's nobody else. If you are kind, I know I'll get back everything intact the day I return, sir.'

'But, look here, Sheocharan—'

Sheocharan gave a start. 'Don't, sir, please don't. You're a saint, sir, I know that perfectly, sir. If I can't trust you, I can't trust God, can I, sir?'

'Well, then, if you insist, you can leave your things here'.

Devaprasad hurried out of the house. He was trying to get a job for his elder son. That would be some relief. He saw the streets were crowded; men, women and children, their meagre luggage perched on their head or carried under the arm, were moving away towards what they imagined was safety. Near Sealdah station, there was such congestion of traffic that the tram car could not proceed. There was hardly room for one to move one's elbow. People were running away for fear of dear life. How many Sheocharans, perhaps, were there in that seething mass! Why 'perhaps'? Of course everyone there was a Sheocharan. They had come to the great city, lured by the chances it offered of making a living. Most of them just managed to make both ends meet, but they had nothing at all at home. Some perhaps had made what was to their meagre hopes a pretty pile. They had settled down and the city had become for them a home from home. And now they were breaking its bonds, running clean away, regretting little . . . How this fatal war had been overturning things! . . . And how, from another end, starving destitutes, defying

fear of death, were rushing into town in the hope of a few beggarly crumbs from prosperous tables!

The poison fumes emitted by the war would sometimes burn into Devaprasad's body and soul. The change it had wrought on his mind was extraordinary. It was not as if he was frightened, frightened by a chronic earthquake; but he felt that he had so long reposed serenely behind certain conventions in a sort of accustomed gloom, and all on a sudden had come a flash of lightning which revealed the naked reality of his environment. He would think, then, of Neela and Nepi—'Blessed are they who have not seen, yet believed!'

There was little sign that the tram would soon be moving. So he got off and started to walk.

The moon had risen and the city in its mantle of beauty looked absolutely transfigured. But like the beauty of the retinue of Death's angel, it remained ignored by men. And to the indifference was added fear, fear of ubiquitous death.

In Devaprasad's house, however, there seemed to be some life. He had managed to get an assurance of a job for his son. And for the first time in several days he exchanged a few words with his wife. Even the taciturn son came and sat for a while beside them. 'You better go round tomorrow morning and make some enquiries about Neela', Devaprasad told him. 'Have you any clue?' he asked his wife.

Neela's mother sighed deeply and said, 'No. How could I?'

After a moment's silence Devaprasad asked again, 'Haven't they been in even once?'

'No', she answered.

Another uncomfortable period of silence followed.

'Get me some paper and a pen, please,' he said, 'I have to write a letter. You should get the food ready early these nights, you know.'

He sat down to write a letter—for Neela. He wanted her badly to come back. He was ready to forgive her if on her part she felt proper remorse. 'My blessings on you, dear daughter'—he began—'You have, I fear, transgressed the laws of ethics as well as the conventions we uphold—'.

Just about then, the quiet of the night was broken by the elongated wail men had come to dread so much, the air raid warning.

Devaprasad stopped writing and hastened inside, 'It's the siren', he said, 'Have the children had their food?'

'Yes. You come and have yours', his wife replied.

'You're strange, you're incomparable', he smiled. 'I can't eat now. Keep the food under cover and bring the children with you to the shelter—quick. I have got to lock the front door. Hurry!'

The elder son went ahead of his father to lock the front door. 'Hurry!' Devaprasad shouted.

His wife could hardly restrain her annoyance. 'Yes, yes, yes. I'm coming. And what a wonderful shelter you've got under the stairs there! Some contrivance, that is!'

The shelter was a laughable little place, not quite a room but a kind of recess under the arch of the stairs, the receptacle formerly of broken old furniture and utensils, coal and cow-dung cake. When A.R.P. authorities published warnings that every family needed a proper shelter, Devaprasad had the place cleaned up and made usable.

He did not resent his wife's annoyance; on the contrary, he smiled indulgently. It was not so easy to accept with equanimity the change that had come inescapably over

the way one ordered one's living. He looked out for himself for his A.R.P. outfit—some cotton wool, tincture of iodine, glycerine etc. which he had put carefully in a discarded tin of biscuits. There was a candle also, more than half-burnt the night before. The little recess did not have any electric connection, and the candle had to do for as long as the raid was going to last.

A sort of panic pervaded the silence as all sat there expectantly. The elder son's wife was trembling in unspoken fear, holding the youngest child firmly on her breast. Devaprasad looked as if he had turned into stone. His wife was mumbling her prayers, unheard.

The buzz of planes could be heard—a sound rather different from what one heard when friendly planes were in the air, or so at least one imagined. The metallic sound seemed more subdued and perhaps the engines were being stopped from time to time and restarted with a louder buzz than before. Everybody began to feel rather restive.

There was the report of an explosion somewhere, followed in a few moments by another and yet another.

Simultaneously a flash of light was seen sinisterly reflected in the courtyard.

The eldest grandchild cried out in fear. Her mother was trembling violently. Soon enough the candle went out and in the gloom everybody felt lost and rather lonely and shuddered to think what lay ahead.

'Granny!' the eldest grandchild cried. 'Yes, yes, it's all right', the grandmother tried to say. Devaprasad's voice sounded reassuringly through the darkness, 'Don't be afraid, children, it'll be all right presently.'

The silence after the first round of explosions was uncanny. It was broken now by the sound of planes. Devaprasad's wife touched the body of her daughter-in-law,

and said gently, 'Why, you're trembling, my dear! Don't be afraid.' The child on her lap began to cry.

The elder son spoke at last, in quite an annoyed tone of voice, 'How silly! Everybody's begun crying at once!'

His wife put her nipple into the child's mouth and pressed him on to her breast.

Explosions again—once, twice . . . The noise rent the ear. The floor of the house seemed to quake.

They sat together, huddled and afraid; even their heart-beats seemed audible. Time seemed to be still. It was as if they were the only people alive in the city. All, all had gone; perhaps they alone, it seemed, were the only unfortunates left.

Just then the siren sounded again in a long, reassuring monotone, 'All clear!' 'All clear!'

'Ah!' Devaprasad said, profoundly relieved. He came out on the verandah and put the light on. It was the greatest of assurances, was light. He thanked God—wasn't there always about Him an aureole of light?—for the safety they still enjoyed. 'You can all come out now', he said to those who were inside.

At the door, suddenly, his daughter-in-law cried out piteously, 'What's happened? Mother! My Mother!'

'What is it, my dear, what is it?' the mother-in-law asked, in consternation.

The little child in her bosom looked pale and cold—he was dead. At the time of the explosions, the mother had pressed him closer to her breast, her frightened grip was tighter every time the child tried to make a movement. The poor little thing sank back, exhausted, unable to breathe, but the mother had no suspicion of his condition, she thought he was asleep. The baby had died, unwittingly throttled by his own mother.

When he realised what had happened, Devaprasad could not say a word, he could not think. When he came to, he imagined it was God's punishment on him, punishment for the sins of his children, of Neela and Nepi. He thought further that his own sin was, indeed, of mountainous dimensions, for hadn't he broken the rules and conventions to which he was subject, merely by reason of his birth? Why did he, a *Vaidya*, renounce his hereditary occupation, why did he give up the quiet and unhurried life in the village where he should have like his fathers practised the art of healing as taught by distant ancestors, why did he exchange the unostentatious simplicity of life in the country for the senseless bustle of city life? Was there an end to desire, to the multitudinous craving to which flesh was heir? And in their frenzied dementia men were rushing about, from one end to the other of our fatuous planet, rushing to pile possession on possession, inventing machinery when the strength of their limbs did not suffice, whirling like a restless comet that boded little but evil . . . Destruction and chaos that a thousand men could not perpetrate was now done in a trice by a bomb or canon or machine-gun fire. So this was the culmination of man's vaunted civilisation! So man had forgotten in his lust for power the very existence of a soul hidden somewhere behind his daily thickening skin! Wasn't the sense of community with one's fellows being lost for ever in this sickening race, where men clutched at each other's throats and would die in the end in their brutish and gory encounters?

Devaprasad felt no further qualms. He realised that even he in his own way must expiate. Neela and Nepi—and of course Devaprasad as well—had been guilty of sin, and the wrath of the gods was being visited upon him in

consequence. He himself had sown the seed and must reap the results. The penalty was, inexorably, his portion. Devaprasad saluted in his mind the Providence that ordered whatever was happening, howsoever inexplicable, on occasion, its ways.

(XXVI)

The nightmare ended with the dawn of Christmas day, holiest of days for all Christians, the birthday of that prince among men, the Son of God, the Christ. The war in Europe where Christians inhabited saw no respite, however. The carnage went on, without ceasing. And in the East, the Japanese, professing the religion propounded by the Buddha, the incarnation of non-violence, had started the murderous Armageddon on the eve of Christmas. The morning papers carried a message from one of the leaders of the Church bemoaning how Christians were celebrating Christmas in an atmosphere polluted by the horriddest calumnies . . . .

'Oh God, the heathens are come into Thine inheritance, Thy holy temple they have defiled"—Neela was reading out from the paper.

'God Almighty!' Bejoy broke in suddenly, and Neela looked up in surprise. 'What's happened?' she asked.

'O, I'm being silly, I expect. But hadn't this virtuous worthy noticed such things before, in peace-time? Any way—Shasthi! Shasthi!' he called the servant.

When the dutiful servant arrived, Bejoy told him, 'Let's celebrate today, shall we? Go to the market, and see if prawns are going cheap. If they are, bring us some.'

'I'll be going out for a while, Bejoy-da', Neela spoke.

'Where to?'



'I had asked Nepi to come back via our home. I'll just go up to the top of the road and wait for him.'

Bejoy did not stop her. He had already from his office told Neela where the bombs had dropped. There had been no incidents near where her parents lived. And yet her anxiety had not been relieved. Nepi had left very early, to get accurate news of the bombed area.

Neela went and stood near the tram stop. Little crowds clustered here and there. Excited discussion went on apace.

Calcutta seethed with rumours about the raid of the night before.

'That area's a desert, now, you know,' some one knowingly said.

'Such a large building, you see, it's just demolished completely.'

'Look out today,' one mysterious person prognosticated.

'They won't come in broad daylight, will they?'

'Why not, my dear fellow, why not? They'll come to celebrate Christmas. Ha, ha!'

Someone spoke in almost a whisper. 'D'you know the Japanese pilots are women, the whole lot of them?'

'What? You don't say so? A number of incredulous voices broke in to enjoy the change of topic.

'Yes, yes, I'm telling you, ain't I?'

'It's incredible. How can it be?'

'Well, well, well, you think what you like. I got it straight from the horse's mouth'. The speaker lowered his voice. 'An officer himself told me, you know. A Japanese plane crashed near Chittagong and the pilot committed hara-kiri. It was a woman. Then another was arrested, also a woman. She said that in Japan these small jobs are done by women!'

The listeners, astounded, were duly impressed.

Neela felt utterly disgusted at first to listen to such chatter, but when she heard the last story she could not help laughing. It was in this same fashion, she recalled, that primitive man had discovered God in the fire and in storm. She remembered having spent a vacation two years back in an out-of-the-way village near her father's home, Katwa. It was the end of April, and when the season's typical storms came, their maid would place a wooden seat on the floor and pray to the God of the air to sit down and be still. . . .

And yet those very men, she thought, would look and act differently if only they had real responsibility. Kanai had told her once of an eighteen or nineteen-year-old lad in his family who was still in swaddling clothes, who had to be fed, had even to have his teeth brushed. Wasn't the entire country today in the same preposterous posture? And yet Indian soldiers were fighting so well, fighting Germans in Africa! . . .

Suddenly she felt sad and shrunken. That lad in Kanai's home had been killed during the raid on December 22. A portion of the building had collapsed. Kanai had vanished. She felt suddenly rather forlorn. Only the other day Kanai had called her 'Comrade', had wanted to tell her all about himself, but had said nothing. He had promised to meet her, but had not even kept the promise, had humiliated her. But she knew his secret—it was Geeta, it must be her, she repeated to herself. And she had noticed lately a sort of weak hesitancy about Kanai's movements—he seemed rather ill, as a matter of fact. Yet he was so polite—he really was such a nice man, in spite of everything. He had so much power in him, and it hurt Neela to see how he was going swiftly downhill. She felt towards him a surge

of tenderness, and at the same time of resentment. Why didn't he think even once of her as a friend when he was in trouble? A cynical smile formed itself almost at once on her lips. Why must he give her a thought, when he did not think even of Geeta or of Bejoy? . . .

She saw Nepi getting off a tram.

'The damage is not very much', he told Neela. 'They missed almost all their targets'.

Nepi and Neela got fairly surrounded by a gaping crowd. For a while, Nepi, normally tongue-tied, got quite eloquent. Neela had to drag him out of the crowd and asked, 'What's the news of home?'

Nepi's face fell. 'Didn't you go?' she asked.

'I'm sorry *didi*, I'd forgotten', he replied, weakly.

'You should be ashamed of yourself', Neela said after a moment of sullen silence.

'Shall I go now, *didi*?' he spoke, apologetically. 'But I'd rather go in the afternoon. I've to take some books for Geeta. The visiting hour at her school is from ten in the morning, and Bejoy-da has given me some books for her.'

Neela said nothing in reply.

'Bejoy-da is giving you a pen', he added.

'Who told you?'

'I know it'.

'What's he going to give *you*?' Neela asked, smiling.

'Oh, I'll have a kit-bag—a first-class kit-bag, you know', he said, enthusiastically. 'It'll come in very handy, moving about as I do'.

Neela smiled. 'Let's hurry', she said, when a clock in a near-by shop struck nine. 'I've to go to work even today, you know.'

'Then I'll go and find out how they are at home in the afternoon, shall I?' Nepi asked.

'Let's meet here at half-past five. I'll be back from office and get off the tram here. We'll go together.'

'That's so much better, *didi*. For if I meet father alone—' Nepi could not quite put in words what he expected his father to tell him.

It was a little after half-past five when Neela got down from the tram. She waited beside a lamp-post for some time, but there were no signs of Nepi. Several A. R. P. lorries went past, as well as some ambulance. A. R. P. workers had already put on their helmets, the traffic policeman had his helmet strapped on his shoulder. In College Street Market, across the road, there were hurrying crowds; all those who were used to shopping after dusk wanted to be back home before the evening came. The night was approaching, and with it the fear of enemy air raids. The small shopkeepers had already begun to put up their shutters for the day.

Nepi did not turn up. It made Neela feel almost sick. What made him so callous towards their parents? She did not wait any longer, but walked on in the direction of her home. As she approached it, she looked up eagerly at the narrow little verandah where, invariably, her father would be seen with his little grandchild on his lap. But her father was not there, and—she rubbed her eyes—yes, it was Nepi leaning on the verandah railing and looking ever so sad, his eyes downcast. So father had not forgiven the truant son, she thought, and the door had remained shut in his face! Would the door open, she wondered, when she arrived? She paused for a moment and then went forward. She must do her duty. She must find out how they were, even though they might not let her in.

When she came to the front door, however, she was

astounded. The door was locked from the outside, and on it was nailed a notice in cardboard—'House to let'.

'Nepi! Nepi!' Neela called out.

Nepi was obviously sunk deep in some thought and had not noticed his sister's arrival. He looked up at Neela's summons and as he did habitually, smiled but rather in a silly way.

'What's happened, Nepi?' She asked him, anxiously.

Nepi came up to where she was and without a word handed her a letter. It was addressed, in her father's hand, to both of them. The envelope was open, for Nepi had already read the contents.

'Father had left it with the grocer and he gave it to me', Nepi explained.

The grocer's shop was very near. Neela knew it well. Often enough, when she was younger, she had been there to buy lozenges. And the grocer himself was a very dependable man.

'Our little niece is dead', Nepi said.

'What?' Neela shuddered. Nepi was referring to the eighteen-month-old child of his brother's.

'Yes, it's the little one. The grocer told me he made all the funeral arrangements. Father was frantic, he even wanted to inform the police about how the child died.'

Indeed, for Devaprasad, it had been the cruellest blow. He had brooded all that morning, then called his son and told him, 'Let's get ready to go to our village home—today. There we can carry on somehow, on village standards. We've got some land, a garden and a pond. Make your children learn something of farming. Give them the minimum education. And don't give the girls any education, I positively forbid it'.

The son had said nothing further. He also had

thought of moving out of Calcutta where more air raids were feared. He was a quiet and timid sort of person. Obediently to his father's wish, he had passed his M.A., but he had no personality. He suffered the woes that came his way with a melancholy equanimity, and the tenor of his life—the life of a school-teacher dominated by Head Masters and Secretaries—was also quiet and timid. He felt now that to cross his father's will might give his excited nerves a bad shock, perhaps even to send him out of his senses. There was no urgency, besides, for him to settle whatever differences he had with his father. For the time being, he agreed it was best to be away from Calcutta, though of course he did not want to leave the city for good. When the war was over or the danger to Calcutta was past, he would come back and settle all differences. Perhaps by that time his father would forget his anger and Neela and Nepi, the prodigal children, also would return.

'Your mother will accompany you', Depaprosad had told him. 'As for myself, I'll be going to my *Gurudeva's Ashram* ("spiritual retreat"). Later, if she wants to come, I'll take her there, too. I renounce my old life from to-day.'

He could realise something of the shock which Devaprasad had felt. Tears had collected in his eyes as he heard his father speak in that vein.

But nothing could stop Devaprasad going his way. His son's tears did not affect him in the least. 'Bring me your mother's and your wife's ornaments', Devaprasad had said.

The son looked up at him, in sheer surprise.

'The ornaments should be sold', Devaprasad went on. 'You should have some capital to start your new life with. And I wish you never again wish for such luxuries.'

As the son kept silent, he continued: 'If of course, you don't agree to what I suggest, well, do what you like. But

anyhow, from this moment I have no further responsibilities on your account.'

Devaprasad's wife and daughter-in-law had listened to this conversation. Without a word they collected whatever ornaments were left and put them down at his feet.

That day they had all gone to their ancestral village near Katwa. Devaprasad had not accompanied them; he had gone somewhere else, the grocer did not know where. Only he had left a letter which the grocer was requested to hand over to Neela or Nepi if they happened to turn up.

It was a lengthy communication and in language which was cruel and sharp and unforgiving. "I used to think", he wrote, "that you wanted in your young lives to bring about an adjustment to your native idealism of the truth and the glory to be gleaned out of other people's achievements. I used to think that you wanted to throw a new light on our own ways of life and thought and to express them in newer moulds. I have been disillusioned. And perhaps the responsibility for it is mine. You have been miseducated; you have lost all respect for your country, her body and soul; you have made no effort to understand her, you have remained aloof and senselessly superior. You have not hesitated, therefore, to adopt foreign notions and ideals wholesale. And in your suicidal passion for foreign ideals of life and conduct you have rushed like mad towards the abyss. When that cursed night I saw Neela at the theatre with the foreign soldiers I had no longer any doubts. You have, indeed, renounced your community, your religion and your country; you have brought ignominy on our family hallowed by generations who lived spiritual lives. I have no vestige of love or affection for you, none at all. There is no purity in your mind, no integrity in your thoughts. You have abjured

morality and welcomed expediency. You have said goodbye to all that have kept our society and our culture intact for so many centuries, and you are rushing dementedly to establish in human society a kind of lowly equalitarianism. You are slaves to the body and its puny desires. You are dead to all faith and the beauties of contemplation. You propose to kill the soul with the sharpened weapons of your newfangled rationalism. It is only the weak and the timorous, it is only those who have not the strength in themselves to remain true to the spirit vouchsafed to them, it is only those who, mouthing principles of an unattainable equality, seek to cling to the deceptive ideal of a unified humanity, that are your friends. You are like poor relations trying to curry favour with their more prosperous kinsmen. Your so-called principles are mean and utterly degrading.

"I have decided to renounce you, to renounce you like I renounce a rotting limb. I do not feel any pain on that score either, I feel so much healthier for it. I do not pour any curses upon you. But I tell you this—if ever again you try to re-establish relations with us, if ever you try to pollute our family with your touch, you will never have any forgiveness."

As she read the letter, Neela felt her blood tingling and her veins fairly ached. She looked at Nepi, her eyes aglow with excitement.

Nepi smiled as before, rather foolishly. 'Father's got most awfully angry', he said, 'and then the little child dying he got a dreadful shock'.

A bitter smile played on Neela's lips. Perhaps, she felt, when nestlings feel their wings strong enough for unaided flight high up in the air, when life calls on them to leave the easy security of their cosy nests, their parent birds feel exactly as Devaprasad seemed to have done and



give vent to their woe! They forget what they themselves had done when they were young. And whenever in the flight into the spheres, the nestlings are lost to sight, the parent birds are chagrined and upbraid them for their adventure.

'Come along, Nepi,' she called her brother, 'We've a long way to go'.

The moon was rising. Shops were closing down, demonstratively. The interior of Keshab Sen Street was never crowded, and the panic of the night before had virtually turned it empty. It was cold, and the bright copper moonlight of the early evening had turned the city smoke into a weird sort of mist.

'*Didi!*' Nepi called her. 'Hum', she replied, absent-mindedly, and walked on. There was something rather unnatural about the way she walked, which surprised her brother. As a matter of fact, it was he, usually indefatigable, who was feeling the strain; he was tired, he looked back several times at their little old rented house. '*Didi!*' he called again.

Neela had gone quite a good few paces ahead. 'Yes, Nepi', she turned round.

'Let's go a little slower, *didi!*'

'But why? Let's hurry', Neela sounded unsympathetic. She resumed her pace, but almost immediately stopped dead. 'Who is it?' she asked.

In the moonlit haze could be seen a figure leaning against a wall. 'Please give me a coin, mother', the figure spoke, 'I haven't had a thing to eat all day'.

'No', Neela fairly shouted, quite unlike herself, and she began walking faster still. There was a storm tossing her mind. When she read her father's letter, she had checked herself at first; she had heard of the death of the little

child. But with every moment her father's cruel statements lashed her all the more. Her eyes blazed as she recalled his imprecations. "You have no purity in your mind, no integrity in your thoughts. You have abjured morality and welcomed expediency." They were the words, eternally familiar, of the bigoted obscurantist. They were hymns of hate hurled by a decaying society at new life germinating in the present. How they talked of the purity of families and clans, how they bragged of descent from the gods, from *Brahma* himself, and yet reconciled themselves to generations of slavery and degradation? How they swore frantically at their progeny who believed no longer in mystic tales of divine descent and special caste and clan prerogatives, who thought of the human family as one, who traced their ancestry to the primitive dwellers in the caves and the woods? How they shouted frenziedly against those who refused to believe nursery tales and wish-fulfilling theories of a cycle of births, who pinned their faith on science, on knowledge ever-growing? What unutterable fools they were to cling dementedly to family pride and all its concomitants, when in point of fact they were going downhill, ever faster, towards perdition? Neela was tearing to shreds, excitedly, what her father had written in his letter.

No, she wouldn't allow it, even when it was her father talking so. She would care for nobody's views, if it came to that. How her own dear father had formed, without reason, doubts on her character and had cruelly affronted her feelings! And yes, she suddenly remembered, yet another had done the same to her. For when she had gone to the play with James and Harold, the look on Kanai's face and his every gesture had spoken of the same affront to her integrity . . . If such were her own people, how could she go on feeling she belonged with them. It was better, even,

if she got to know the foreigners better and in a different way than she did. They were human beings, all of them. And they, at any rate, never dreamt of putting fetters round a woman's soul; they never would make her put on a rigid veil and shut her off all contact with the world outside. Yes, the foreigners were more human . . .

Nepi had lagged behind. He stood before the starving man, and was putting his hand into his pocket to see if he could give him a pice. It had to be a two-pice bit, though, for the smaller coin had somehow vanished from circulation.

### (XXVII)

The unquiet in her mind was now reflected in Neela's face. Nepi feared even to look up at her. Bejoy had noticed the change, but had said nothing.

It was Sunday, and Bejoy was at home. 'Can I ask you something, Bejoy-da?' Neela spoke to him.

'Fire away', Bejoy smiled, 'I'm always ready to listen, except when I'm trying to sleep. That's why I suppose I've remained a sour bachelor'.

Neela, ignoring the witticism, said simply, 'I've lately got to know two Britishers, Air Force men they are. Would you mind if I ask them over here, if of course I happen to see them?'

'Not in the least, my dear', Bejoy replied. 'And even if I do mind, why must you listen?'

'Oh, I must. This place belongs to you.'

'Ah well, the tenancy is in my name, but you all share expenses. Your right here is no less than mine.'

Neela did not say a word.

'I don't understand', Bejoy resumed with a smile, 'how you, who are so intelligent, should think of such things.'

Isn't partition a common event even in our wonderful joint families? And you have a right to the use of this place just as you like.'

Neela felt rather hurt, but she had nothing whatever to say. After all, she remembered, it was she who had started the topic.

Bejoy did not prolong the conversation. Possibly he had a lot of work to do, for he went to the bath and within an hour he had had his meal and was ready to go out. 'Neela, my dear', he said affectionately, 'Why aren't you ready yet?'

'Yes, I shan't be long', she said in a tired voice.

'Have I hurt you, Neela?' Bejoy asked with his habitual smile.

'No', she answered and walked away.

When she came back, she saw Bejoy had already packed a small suit case and was trying to get his bedding strapped. She was surprised. 'I'm going out for a few days, Neela', Bejoy smiled at her.

'Are you going to a conference somewhere? I hadn't heard of any.'

'No, it isn't that. I'm going to some East Bengal districts to find out about conditions there. Things are in a pretty horrid mess in those parts. We should get a first-hand account.'

'What's happened?'

'I see, you haven't heard. But reports have reached the Party office.' He smiled again after a moment. 'I'd forgotten you don't seem to go to the Party Office very much these days.'

Neela was silent for a while and then said, 'I'm in a dreadful state of mind, Bejoy-da, and I can't bear it much longer'.

'I know, sister, but you've just got to get over it.'

Neela stood without moving, like a statue in stone.

'It's no good being upset', Bejoy resumed, 'We've got to stand up to everything. All the world is in turmoil and the accumulated sorrows of our country make it all the more excruciating. . . . But Neela, whatever happens, we've got to get over our hurdles, haven't we, my dear?'

This time also Neela gave no reply.

As he was going, Bejoy turned towards her and said, 'I shan't be here sometime, maybe fifteen days or so. You'll have to look after everything—especially you'll have to look after our Nepi and Shasthi. You'll have to see that the one eats and the other cooks in time! And don't forget to ask Nepi when he goes out on his hundred errands if he has any money on him. He usually hasn't, and you must give him something. Ask Shasthi if he has enough to do the shopping with from day to day, and get him to tell you how much he has spent and how much is left.'

Neela smiled to hear this catalogue of jobs.

'Take care of yourself, sister. This is a personal request', Bejoy said as he moved towards the door.

'You haven't told me why you're going?' Neela asked.

'Oh, haven't I?' Bejoy scratched his head to make her laugh. 'You better ask Nepi, my dear. He'll give you an account in impassioned language. As for me, well, I must run to catch my train.'

The panic over air raids had largely abated. People were getting over their first feeling of being overwhelmed. And with it all, Neela's character was also undergoing a subtle change. She was a modern girl, who had accepted an ideal as her life's lodestar. She had determined not only to renounce for herself the conventions and prejudices of a

past that was dead or dying; she had to see also that the entire society was rid of its undesirable birthmarks. Her ideal was such that it did not permit of individual contemplation and apprehension of its essence. It was not a summons to solitariness, to mystic illumination. Its consummation lay in universality, not in fulfilment in individual and exceptional instances. Neela, thus, had to propagate her ideal; that indeed was her duty. And to do her duty she had to fortify her own personality, to muster courage and strength with a conscious effort, the inevitable result of it being the importation of a certain severity in her character, a certain dogmatic aversion, amounting almost to contempt, towards whatever militated against her ideals, aversion which some people likened to a sort of religious orthodoxy. Recent events, besides, had hardened Neela's personal feelings. When people streamed out of Calcutta in sheer, panicky and senseless flight from the fear of attack by unfamiliar engines of death, Neela reacted sharply and in utter indignation had condemned the poor frightened creatures as no better than unthinking beasts. . . .

When in the hour of danger, men should have stuck together and churned out of the sea of death the nectar storied in songs about the gods, when men should have realised the majesty of their spirit soaring into heights of unwonted activity, they were simply running away! And they were running away from the imagined fear of a sudden and hurried death towards death by inches—death by starvation, disease and mishap.

Nepi's eyes glowed, too, in indignation. He had been working among the labourers in some suburban factories, following the instructions of their Union. He was trying to fight the workers' demoralisation, but the results were not too promising. 'And the owners!' he was telling his sister,

'they're such rogues that they refuse to increase wages and haggle desperately over a special Risks allowance. The owners and the more backward workers make things so maddeningly difficult!'

'If Kanai-da was here', he added, after a while, 'how useful he could have made himself!'

'Who? Kanai-babu?' Neela gave a derisive laugh.

'Why do you laugh, *didi*?' he asked.

'Oh, how can you?' Neela laughed the louder in reply.

'Do think, please, what a shock he's got', Nepi pleaded.

'I know it and I'm sorry for him, but do you expect me to forgive his running away? There was a little girl once who got frightened of doctors because she had to have an injection once. She could tell a doctor from his stethoscope, and would cry her heart out when she saw in the street anybody with the tube of a *hookah* in his hand. How we would laugh then! Well, Kanai-babu's rather like that little girl, isn't he? A few sudden bombs fell on his house and killed some of his people, but that was enough to send him scampering out of town! It's just like the little girl imagining every rubber tube to be a stethoscope. Would a bomb have killed him for sure, if he stayed on in Calcutta? Well, you can say what you like, but your Kanai-babu's a coward.'

This argument had taken place some days back, and Bejoy was in the room, sunk deep in a book. Even he, however, could not help overhearing, and once he spoke to Neela from inside the room, 'You're riddling poor Nepi, but you'll never succeed in deflecting him from his devotion to his hero. His love for Kanai is like that of the cowherds of *Braja* for their *Krishna*!'

'Why must you also speak in that vain, Bejoy-da?' Nepi asked.

'But—what has your sister told you?'

'She says Kanai-babu has run away.'

'No', Bejoy shook his head sadly, 'I don't think so, I don't, at all.'

'What makes you so certain?' It was Neela who now spoke.

'It isn't only in regard to Kanai, but in regard to what both of you seem to think about human nature, that I disagree. Our people aren't in the least like frightened, lowly animals. They are men, hungering to express themselves, just like you or me. Of course, they have their fears, so many fears and for so many reasons. But—you wait, and you'll see what they'll do when they've got rid of all that, and they will, soon.'

'But tell us about Kanai-babu first of all', Neela insisted. 'So you think he belongs with that crowd, don't you?'

'Surely he has his limitations. Besides——'

'That's enough. I don't want to hear any more', Neela concluded.

'You've got to listen to more, my dear,' Bejoy said with a smile. 'Kanai may have left town out of fear, or he might have even joined the Air Force, for all we know.'

'What? The Air Force?' Neela asked, her eyes aglow.

'Yes, why not? He might have had an idea that he must avenge the raid on his home.'

'Has he told you? Are you sure?' There was a quiver in Neela's voice.

'No, I've heard nothing. I'm only trying to guess.'

'Oh, you guess? Then perhaps it isn't true?'

'Perhaps. But in any case, Neela, I know for certain that Kanai has great qualities. I'm absolutely certain he can do nothing that is mean.'

The argument had ended there. No trace of Kanai had



been found since then. Neela had met James and Harold several times at Esplanade and had made enquiries through them, but no definite news was forthcoming. She had got to know the two foreigners fairly intimately. She wanted to ask them to come where she lived. But Bejoy had told her, 'Try and go slow'.

There was never a note of command in Bejoy's words. Sometimes Neela felt that it was better if there was, for in that case she would have felt like rebelling against him, but she didn't.

Now Bejoy had gone, for about a fortnight. It was the twentieth of January; he would be back about the fifth or sixth of the next month. Neela would wait till he returned.

Nepi had gone somewhere two days back. He was to have returned that morning. He hadn't yet. He might or might not be coming back; that was his way.

Neela lay quietly on the bed for a while. It was Sunday, her only free day in the week. But, this day was a problem for her. On other days she had work and the time passed, without her having to worry how. And after a hard day's work she was tired, so tired that it did not take her long to find shelter in sleep. Besides, there were Bejoy and Nepi, as a rule, to talk to. It would have been good if Nepi at least was with her that day. How he would have discussed, in his passionate manner, the condition of the country! . . . Neela looked around and took hold of Bejoy's newspaper file. Lazily, she turned over the pages.

She had read the papers regularly, but since the events of late December few things left an impression on her mind. Like anxious relatives keeping vigil by the bedside of some one dearly beloved and forgetting all about the rest of the world, her mind seemed to concentrate on the shocks she

had had, and was fairly oblivious to whatever was going on outside.

Turning over the file, she saw the issue dated the first of January. There was a cartoon on the front page; it showed a bomb with the inscription—'Made in Japan'—on it, strung to a card on which was written: 'To our friends and well-wishers, from General Tojo'.

Who knew what was appearing in newspapers in Japanese-occupied Burma? Here the papers gave a varied fare. Soviet victories were splashed; the Red Army was advancing on a front of 130 miles. The Hindu Mahasabha was meeting in conference, vociferating for *Akhand Hindusthan* (India undivided). She turned that page and saw the editorial columns. On this page, too, there was a cartoon which Neela found striking. The ghoul of war was shown in a whirl—'39, '40, '41, '42, '43—. And it snapped its fingers and from out of the earth was emerging a hideous skeleton, the figure of a female, wrathful, famishing and nearly nude,—it was famine. And just behind her peeped another spectre, the skin torn out of its face—it was pestilence. Up on the sky flew hordes of carrion-crows and vultures, shells burst, planes roared, the sun was hidden behind a sinister mist. The caption to the cartoon was —"New Year, 1943".

Neela felt herself in a kind of stupor: Was that the truth? Was 1943 appearing in such a hideous garb? She read the editorial comments—"Into the roar of cannon, the clang of steel, the wail of the fallen and the subjugated has come the New Year. We shudder to think what awaits us this year, especially in Bengal."

She turned over page after page. From London came news of "1943—a year of offensive", the Soviets determined on mighty blows, Hitler's warning to Germans . . .

A small item placed inconspicuously in a corner drew Neela's attention. "Looting of *Hat* (large market place): Police open fire, one killed, another injured." So hungry men were being goaded into frenzy. She thought immediately of the spectre of famine drawn so vividly by the artist.

Further on, she read of "Government's directions to the food grains trade", "Commerce Member's statement on the Food Crisis". The member of the Viceroy's executive council had said that 38000 tons of rice used to be exported to Ceylon from India, and the figure had been brought down to 12000. If, however, the situation did not improve, all export of foodgrains would have to be stopped.

Ever so many items flashed across, as Neela glanced through the pages. "Malaviyaji's confidence in democratic victory." "War to continue another year and a half." "We must make the Blood Bank our national asset."

A member of the Legislative Assembly had written to the Chief Minister: "Security prisoners and other political detenus should, in view of the danger of air raids in Calcutta, be transferred to jails outside the city."

Neela thought, as she read it, of Gunada-babu and his wife.

"Food supply at cheap rates." She read on another page. A canteen was being opened for poor middle-class people, and the Hon'ble the Commerce Member was to make a speech on the occasion.

"Train collision near Dum Dum." "Dacoities in Bengal"—news of it came from all over, Munshiganj, Dacca, Kishoreganj, Serajunge, Burdwan.

"India's Sterling Debts. Heavy Reduction." So India was repaying her debt to Britain at a terrific pace—from 367 million it was now somewhere round a hundred. The cloth

crisis was being sought to be met by the introduction of Standard Cloth.

There was paper shortage in the country. Even the University was in terrible straits.

The Madras Government was tightening up Press censorship regulations.

She put down the file. Who did not know how truncated was freedom of the press in India? She thought suddenly of the epic story in the Mahabharata: in what shape would the wonderful *Geeta* ('Song celestial') have emerged if *Sanjay*, its scribe, had been manacled in the court of the Kurus?

Neela waited, for Nepi or for Bejoy to come back and tell her about what was happening in the country. In her eyes there floated the picture of famine and pestilence hideously approaching, of a misty sky torn by vulture-planes and suffocating in gunpowder smoke!

There was a knock at the front door, and Neela started. It must be Nepi, or what was more likely, some poor destitute begging for food. Quite a number of them used to come almost daily. It was surprising, for not only Bejoy, but the poor clerk in the other flat also, would never send them back without something.

She went downstairs to answer the door. It was neither Nepi nor the destitutes. It was Geeta standing there.

A lot of change seemed to have come over Geeta in a month's time. Now she came to the house and walked back on her own. She had got over her old shyness as she spoke.

'How're you, Neela-di?' She asked.

'How're you, Geeta? Come right in.'

'Is Bejoy-da at home?'

'No. He's out of town. He won't be back for a fortnight.'

'A fortnight?'

'Yes.'

'Is Nepi-da here?'

Geeta sat for a few minutes more and then got up to go.

'Must you go so early?' Neela asked her.

'I'm afraid I must.' It seemed to Neela that Geeta did not feel very much at home in her company.

As she was going out, Geeta turned round and said 'Neela-di?'

'Yes.'

'Have you any news of Kanai-da?'

'No'. Neela felt quite sorry for the girl as she went away.

A pale smile broke on Neela's lips. Kanai had done a cruel wrong in treating Geeta so cavalierly. It was horrid of him . . . Her thoughts wandered away in a moment. What an amazing creature was man! The pageantry of death and destruction had darkened the sky, perhaps before long even the kind old sun would be barred from their view, perhaps the iron wheels of monster tanks would wring all life out of the earth's bosom. Men had already begun to die in shoals of sheer starvation. Even of a night one did not have repose, for out of the sky came death-dealing bombs. Mansions and huts were being smashed into dust. And yet in the midst of it all men ached for life, and Geeta dreamt of a little home of her own! It was better by far, that circumstances had sent her where she now was.

She thought after a while of what she had read about the deluge, the darkness descending on land, water and sky, black clouds enveloping everything, storm convulsing the elements, thunder and lightning, floods and earthquake!

That was how creation would meet with its doom. Everyone would know that none could save another, and yet in spite of it all, men and women would cling together, cling in spite of the utterest despair, in the deepest gloom! . . .

Knock on the front-door again. The procession of the skeletons had arrived. 'Mother! give us something—a morsel of rice, some leavings from your plate! give us something!'. . .

Nepi came in the afternoon. This time he was not alone. He had brought James and Harold along with him. 'I'm so glad you've come', said Neela, welcoming the guests.

### (XXVIII)

A letter arrived from Bejoy, from somewhere in eastern Bengal. The envelope had been cut open and a slip attached to seal it again. A rubber-stamp indicated it was "opened by inland censor". All letters were scrutinised before they were despatched. The sight of it made Neela feel even more bitter. . . Was there a censorship in Russia? Perhaps, there was. Why perhaps, it was certainly there. And surely, they needed it too. There must be wolves in Russia in sheeps' clothing, posing patriotism and straining after civil dissension and sabotage of socialist construction. . . . How long must men have to be suspicious of one another? Who knew how long? . . .

It was not a long letter which Bejoy had written. He had made enquiries about Neela and Nepi. ". . . I know you're well, but I ask because it's usual to do so. I say this because I believe that you are sensible enough to keep yourselves well. I've read in the papers about two more air-raids on Calcutta. It's good that some enemy planes were brought down. We're expected to be very bucked about it, I am

sure, for doesn't one of our proverbs say something about God in His good pleasure killing or protecting us, and now it's foreign fighters who alone can protect us, and we are not allowed to be really on the scene. . .

"I'll be going back in a few more days' time. You asked me, Neela, why I started on this round from village to village and also in little towns. I didn't answer you, then, and if I begin writing about what I've seen, I'll have to be writing a sort of epic. I must, therefore, desist. But I wish to say only one thing—I must have cried when I was young, but I haven't since: it's only coming here that I realise anew that there's such a thing as tears and a queer sensation of heat round one's temples. . .

"There seems little difference here between earth and sky. It's early February, but already the paddy seems to have vanished from the fields. The Denial Policy (Government taking away boats and other means of transport to prevent them falling into enemy hands) last year, the drought this year. Black Marketeers drawing, by a sort of sleight-of-hand process, all foodgrains away from the people, like libidinous males capturing their prey and pulling cleverly a veil over the transaction. And the Government . . ." The censor had erased whatever was written in this portion of the letter. ". . . Things are going downhill, at a frightful pace. People are dying; they're leaving their homes, deserting wives and children. They're selling their children even, especially the girls.

"I hope you see Geeta from time to time and help to cheer her up. She must still be moping for her Kanai-da. Let me know as soon as ever you get news of Kanai. Look up Gunada Babu's wife now and then and give her ten rupees from me. Yours, Bejoy-da."

Neela's brow puckered as she read the last lines. For

some time now she had developed a bitter distaste for whatever confronted her. She had tried to forget her personal worries in work for their organisation, but she had not liked it much either. And what irked her most of all was to look up people, ask how they were, do them a good turn. Nepi seemed now-a-days to be avoiding her company. James and Harold had come several times, but she was not at all sure if she liked them a lot. They were pleasant, and often she would talk animatedly with them, but that was about all. She had decided, however, to join more directly in war work, perhaps the W.A.C. or something. She hated the life of a clerk—tied to a desk from ten to five and then left tired and sad, to fend for herself the rest of the time. She could not stand it much longer. Of course, people would talk if she joined the W.A.C. Let them! Gunada-babu's wife had told her the other day how people always talked and one should not mind.

That reminded her. She had to go and look her up. She did not relish the idea, but there was no help, since Bejoy wanted her to.

It was quite a job to walk along the pavement. Long, restless queues stood in unaccustomed formation before the rice shops. Nepi was among the volunteers who were trying to keep the crowd patient and orderly. Apart from the queues, you saw rows of destitutes squatting on the ground, their number increasing from day to day, watching with dull, dispirited eyes the doling of rice to ticket-holders, setting up here and there a kind of family life, picking lice out of each other's hair, dirtied by days on the road. . .

"When I came here", Bejoy had written, "I realised, after a very long time, that there were tears even in my dried-up eyes." . . .

Neela reached Gunada's house and knocked at the door.



It was opened by Gunada's wife. 'You were with Bejoy-babu last time, weren't you?' she asked.

'Bejoy-da has sent me here', Neela answered, 'to find out how you are'.

'I was wondering how to send him word.'

'But he is out of town. He'll be a few days coming back.'

'Oh?' Gunada's wife appeared worried to hear that.

Neela took out a ten-rupee note and pushed it into her hand. 'Bejoyda's told me to give it to you', she said.

Gunada's wife did not refuse the gift. She held the note in her hand and said, 'you are a modern girl, aren't you? And you go about doing *Swadeshi* (patriotic work) Can you do one thing for me?

'Yes, why not?' Neela smiled.

'I'll give you ten more rupees, but could you get me some rice and *Atta* and sugar?'

Neela was surprised. She could not see why she was being asked to do her shopping.

'Money means nothing to me these days', Gunada's wife went on. 'There's no rice in the house for the last three days. The shopkeeper over there stood in the queue and bought me some rice earlier, but I hear his family has had no rice for days now, and I couldn't possibly ask him to buy me some. And there's neither *atta* nor sugar in the house. My little boy is crying for rice, he's fed up with potato curry every day.'

'You haven't had rice for the last three days?' Neela asked in surprise.

'No. There isn't a grain in the house. I can't go out to buy it. The shopkeeper there was once helped by my husband, which is why he tries to do what he can for me. But he can't get enough rice for his own family and for us.'

'Couldn't you send your elder son to the queue?' Neela asked.

'He's got fever', she replied, shortly.

Neela did not know what made her say such a thing, but she suddenly burst out. 'I saw many respectable girls in a queue the other day. You might have gone yourself—you've been starving for the last three days!'

Gunada's wife looked at Neela, fixedly. After a moment of strained silence, she said in unusually quiet tones: 'They and I don't belong to the same category. I couldn't stand in the queue, whatever happened. They're worse than beggars.'

'Why must you hate them so?' Neela put in.

Gunada's wife gave a sudden laugh. 'I see', she said, 'So you're one of those who want to make everybody equal in the world, aren't you?'

'Yes', Neela rejoined firmly. 'That's what I want. You have no right to talk as you are doing. They are no worse than you are, they aren't, I'm sure.'

'All right, then, why don't you turn them into my equals and I wouldn't look down on them any longer. But listen, my girl, if you want me to get down to their level, I just wouldn't, not for all the arguments in the world you give me.'

Neela stared at her intently, as she continued; 'There's plenty of prosperous people in society, with cars and big houses and so on. I don't care to be like them. I don't care to be like the beggars also. What kind of patriots are you, if you want all the world levelled down to beggary. Is that your idea of freedom?'

Suddenly a groan was heard from the room next door. 'I'm coming, son', Gunada's wife said and hurried along.

Neela waited for a while, and then asked, 'Can I come in and help?' 'Yes', she was told.

Neela entered the room and saw Gunada's son obviously in a high fever. His mother sat beside him, pressing a wet towel on his forehead. 'The temperature's rising, I think', she said to Neela. 'He was better when you first came.'

'It must be high fever', Neela said, in a frightened sort of voice.

'Yes. The doctor says it looks like typhoid.'

'Who's the doctor?'

'It is a friend of my husband's and has known our family a long time. But the trouble is about medicine. The prices are unimaginable and even if you get together the money you can't always get it.' . . .

'If you don't mind,' Neela said, hesitatingly. 'Shall I send you some money?'

'Well, I'll tell you when I need it badly enough. I've sent word to the newspaper office also. After all, my husband worked there, right from the time the paper was first started. They should remember all that. . . And I've no shame about accepting money from Bejoy-babu. You see, once when Bejoy was in jail, my husband was out and he gave a monthly allowance to Bejoy's brother who was then at College . . . I've sold my bangles and have got some cash for the moment, but I can't buy things inspite of that. Wonderful times these! Anyhow, I'd much rather starve to death than stand in the queue there!'

'Please give me the money', Neela spoke fast, 'I'll see what I can do. And I'll send some rice and some *atta* at once from our stock at home——'

'Don't be in such a hurry, Neela. I'll carry on some how. Don't please send your rice. You'll need it, and I won't take it.'

When Neela reached home, she saw Nepi creating quite a furore. There were marks of blood on his clothes, and he was busy arranging hot water, tincture of iodine and clean linen on the table. Geeta leant over a woman and was fanning her. The head of the woman was bandaged and she lay still in a faint.

'What's happened, Nepi?' Neela asked.

'This girl had come early in the morning to stand in the queue. But she had fever, and waiting a long time she fainted away. She fell on the pavement and got a nasty cut on the forehead. . . And so we brought her along. Good job that Geeta was here! She's become quite an expert nurse. Look!'

'They both looked at Geeta, who smiled at them. She was rendering first aid in quite a confident manner. It was for her quite an unusual confidence. Geeta had changed; you no longer felt like pitying her, she had grown up. When Neela offered to help her, she smiled sweetly but said, firmly enough, 'Don't disturb her, Neela-di. I'm looking after her and she'll be alright in a minute.'

When the girl came to, she looked round to see strangers about her and burst into tears.

'Why do you cry? There's no need for fear. You'll be quite all right.'

She did not stop crying, however. 'Where's my rice?' She asked between her sobs.

'Rice? But you had no rice on you.'

'Didn't I? But I came to get rice! How can I get some now?'

'It wouldn't hurt if you don't. You've got fever.'

'But I have children at home—three children. What'll they have to eat?'

'You should have sent one of them to the queue. With your fever you should not have stirred out.'

'What could I do? The boys are so young, and the girl's just turned thirteen, who could I send?'

'You should have sent the girl, that's clear.'

The reply now came in tones of sharp disapproval. 'You're rich people and you don't realise our position. If my girl stands there in the queue, well, gentlefolk beckon to her and the *goondas* (street vagabonds) talk bawdily.'

Geeta suddenly tore herself away from the talk.

Neela remembered what she had heard at Gunada's place. 'We're giving you some rice', she told the woman, 'you take it home'.

Nepi took her along in a rickshaw. As she was leaving, she looked at Neela and said, God will bless you. You'll marry a prince, I'm sure.'

It made Neela laugh outright and the poor woman felt rather foolish. 'Why do you laugh?' she said, 'Are you in that case——'

'Yes?'

'Are you a widow?'

'No. I'm not married, and I won't get married, either.'

The woman looked astounded and after a moment said, 'I see. You're a school-ma'am, aren't you? You've read at college?'

'Yes', Neela smiled, 'but I work in an office'.

'You've done well', the woman sighed. 'I'm a widow and I work as a charwoman. If I had some education——' She sighed again, and continued. 'You're clever people, you read and know such a lot. Tell me when's this war going to end? When's our troubles going to end? Shall we live to see the end of this war, if it's going to end at all?'

Neela could not answer these simple questions. A sudden melancholy had made her speechless.

Absent-mindedly she pulled the day's paper towards her. 'Mid-day air attack on Chittagong area on Saturday', she read. But she could not give her mind to the paper. She just sat lazily, a vacant look in her eyes. Suddenly, after a while, she wondered where Geeta had gone to. 'Geeta?' she called.

'Yes.' Geeta came in answer to her summons. Obviously enough, she had been crying and had just wiped off her tears. 'Why are you crying, Geeta?' Neela asked. 'It's nothing', she replied. Pressed again, she added, 'How good that woman is, Neela-di! She was ill, and yet she didn't send her young daughter to stand in the queue.'

It reminded Neela that she had promised to get some rice and *atta* and sugar for Gunada-babu's wife.

'Please hurry with your bath, Neela-di,' Geeta said, 'Dinner is ready. I'll just see if the meat curry is all right.'

'Meat?'

'It's me celebrating', Geeta said shyly, 'You know I'm in a job now.'

Neela recalled how she had asked Kanai once to coffee. . .

'I wish Kanai-da was here to-day', Geeta added, and went out of the room. Possibly she wanted again to hide her tears.

After dinner Neela sent Nepi out to see if he could manage to get some rice and *atta*. Then she started writing a letter to Bejoy. She gave him news of Geeta, of Gunada's wife, and added: "My plans are all postponed for your sake. But I've decided to join directly in war-work. How I wish this war was over! I feel strangled by all that is happening around us these days. And so I'll do all I can to help so

that the war is over as quick as it can be. Besides, I prefer that sort of work. I am fairly fed up with things. I want to sink myself, in unceasing work, right in the centre of things happening. For otherwise, I'm sick and tired of my own load. Please come back soon. And if you can't, give me your consent by return of post. Yours, Neela."

Bejoy returned on the fourth of February. He had not answered Neela's letter.

'Didn't you get my letter?' was the first question Neela asked.

'What were conditions like?' asked Nepi.

Bejoy replied to both at the same time. 'I got your letter rather late, and there was no time to answer it. I had a wire from the office and so I rushed back. I haven't the time now to tell you all I've seen. I've to be going off again in a few hours.'

'Where to?'

'Delhi, then to Bombay. I may have to be running back to Delhi again.'

'But Bejoy-da', Neela pleaded, 'you must give me an answer'.

Bejoy looked at her for a while. 'Wait for a few more days, please', he said.

'But why must you hinder my plans, and not tell me your reasons?'

'I don't stand in your way, Neela', he answered, 'but—'

'Please don't repeat these 'buts', Bejoy-da.'

'Well, if you don't listen to my advice, I shan't be sorry. I don't say "no" to your suggestion, either. And yet I ask you to wait a little longer. Something of a sudden cataclysm for all of us in the country seems brewing. Don't look questioningly at me—I can't tell you anything and I am hardly sure of anything, either. Only there are

certain things in the air, and I'm going to see if I can scent it out.'

When he was leaving for the station, he turned round and said to Neela, 'I heard at the office that Gunada-da's son's in a precarious condition, please find out if you can manage to help.'

Neela's soul seemed to be in revolt. She felt she could not wait a day longer, she ached for release from that atmosphere of gloom—of illness and starvation and a myriad woes. But she could not say anything. And when she went to Gunada's place, she could not come back. She was astounded to see Gunada's wife. Alone, she sat at her son's bedside. There were others also in the house from time to time—the shopkeeper neighbour and his wife, a char-woman. But they knew nothing about looking after the sick child.

'Let me stay overnight, *Bowdi*', Neela asked.

'Stay if you like.' Gunada's wife answered in an unusual tone of voice.

February the eleventh.

Neela had been amazed to see her *Bowdi*'s limitless patience. The child was in something like a delirium the night before, but was better since dawn and was now asleep. Neela, tired herself with the night's vigil, had fallen into a heavy drowse. When she got up, she saw Gunada's wife had finished her bath and was saying her prayers. From Gunada's office, the daily paper had arrived and the front page could be seen clearly. Possibly Gunada's wife had noticed it already, but when Neela looked at it she gave a start. Large headlines announced: "Gandhiji



undertakes fast of three weeks' duration." The fast had already begun, from mid-day, February the tenth.

Neela could not take her eyes off the paper, though she hardly read a word.

'So you've seen the news?' Gunada's wife asked her. Neela only looked up at her face in reply.

'Bowling down to the deity this morning', she said, 'I couldn't bring myself to pray for my child's health, I could only repeat over and over again, "Save our Mahatmaji, let him live to be a hundred".'

Neela felt tears shining up her eyes. She had no faith in prayer, but she had not outgrown her childhood ideas altogether, and she could not forget that there were sentiments which could not be shed so easily.

She remembered suddenly the old story that Babar the Mughal Emperor had given his life to save his dearly-beloved son Humayun. His life was to Babar his dearest possession, and it was the same in everybody's case, too. What more could one sacrifice than one's life? If she had a dearest one, perhaps, Neela thought, she might have spoken as her *Bowdi* had just spoken. She gave a sudden start. Over and over again, the picture of one had emerged in her mind. 'No', she said to herself in sudden, rude resolution.

'What is it, Neela?' Gunada's wife asked, in surprise.

Neela turned towards her and said, '*Bowdi*, I must be off.' She was in a peculiarly excited frame of mind. She wanted to brush off her mind the picture that had emerged immediately she had thought of a dearest one. And yet the picture seemed to refuse to be ejected. She felt as if it was a sort of disconcerting discovery, a discovery that gave her also a pang of shame.

## (XXIX)

It was some days later—the twentyeighth of February. The great city was silent, but ominous with excitement, with withering worry. Its heart was so heavy that it could not even emit a cry; a cloud, black like death, loomed on the mind's horizon, and in the air, still with suspense, one could hardly take breath. It was the nineteenth day of Mahatma Gandhi's fast. "Gandhiji somewhat apathetic and not quite so cheerful—very little change in condition"—so ran the headlines.

"... From last night Gandhiji has given up taking the little citrus juice which he was having mixed with water. He looks listless and exhausted. . ."

Transcending all worry there was emerging in men's minds an impossible hope, hope that defied all counsel which the sciences gave. They espied on the crest of death-dark clouds the magic suggestion of an indefinable effulgence.

The newspaper dated February 22 lay before Neela and Nepi. It showed in menacing headliness: "Gandhiji too weak, apathetic and at times drowsy. It may be too late to save his life if fast not ended without delay." On that day the Mahatma could hardly drink any water. His nerves were in such condition that he seemed to be in a coma. Famous doctors who came from all over India to examine him, signed the bulletin and declared that an immediate termination of the fast was urgently indicated.

But the great man had shown himself superior to their prognostications. There was not much of a change in his general condition of weakness, but his consciousness had fought a way out of the stupor which seemed to overtake it, the accustomed smile had lit up his weary face.

All India was anxiously counting the days, counting on

supra-scientific hopes. Even Bejoy looked sombre and grave. He had returned the day after the fast began, and his editor himself had rushed to Bombay. He was looking up an old newspaper file, re-reading Gandhiji's letters. Every syllable of the letters breathed unconquerable optimism and strength. From time to time Bejoy marked sentences heavily with a red pencil.

He read the last paragraph of the last letter to the Viceroy:

"Despite your description of it as a form of political blackmail, it is on my part meant to be an appeal to the highest tribunal for justice which I have failed to secure from you. If I do not survive the ordeal, I shall go to the judgment seat, with the fullest faith in my innocence".

Nepi's eyes glistened as he read those lines. He got up in suppressed excitement. Bejoy threw a glance at him, and the lad approached him. 'You'll see, Bejoy-da', he said, 'Mahatmaji will most certainly survive this test.'

Bejoy smiled, rather oddly. Neela sighed. There was just then a knock at the front door, and Nepi, leaning across the verandah, reported that Stuart and Mackenzie had arrived.

Neela looked quite annoyed. 'You go down, Nepi, and bring them in', Bejoy said.

As Nepi went downstairs, Bejoy turned towards Neela and said, 'There's no reason for you to be annoyed, Neela. Stuart and Mackenzie are really very good chaps.'

'But I don't feel like meeting anybody, Bejoy-da', Neela replied, in a listless voice.

There was the sound of steps on the stairs, and Bejoy went forward and introduced himself. 'We've heard such a lot about you from Miss Sen', the newcomers told him.

For a while there seemed to be a rather strained

silence. 'You haven't been here some time, have you?' Bejoy asked.

'No, we haven't'. Harold answered slowly, 'but every time we've been off work we've wanted badly to come.'

'Mr. Gandhi is rather an inscrutable person', James said, 'but in any case he seems to be displaying powers which science does not look like being able to explain very easily.'

Harold pointed to the paper dated February 22 and said, 'You know, Mr. Sarkar, we were most awfully worried when we read about Mr. Gandhi's condition, but the next day we could hardly believe our eyes.'

'Well, I'm sure he's one of the greatest men of all time', James put in.

'What do you people think of this fast?' Bejoy asked.

James hesitated for a moment, then said, 'To tell you the truth, we did think at first that it was sort of political blackmail. But in a few days we learnt to know better. In a sense, I expect, it is kind of crucifying the flesh.'

Neela, ill at ease all this time, got up and said, 'Please excuse me. I have to be going out.'

When she had left, James asked, hesitantly, 'Miss Sen seemed rather out of sorts, didn't she?'

'Yes', Bejoy said with a smile, 'she is worried, very worried over Gandhiji's fast.'

'Of course, that's absolutely natural', Harold put in.

A short spell of silence followed, and then James said, 'You see, Mr. Sarkar, this was why we hesitated to come here for some days now.'

'There's no reason for that, I'm sure', Bejoy rejoined. 'Why should our political differences, if any, keep us absolutely apart? If we're friends, well, we're friends, and that's all there is to it . . . D'you know Gandhiji addresses

even Linlithgow as his friend and he means it in all sincerity?'

'You're right, but you'll understand our hesitation also, won't you? . . . And could you possibly let's have the names of books we can read to get to know Mr. Gandhi better?'

'Of course, with pleasure.'

They stayed quite some time and took with them a list of books. 'Please come again', Bejoy said, as they parted.

'We certainly will, and it was a real pleasure to have met you, Mr. Sarkar. . . '

There was a lightness in his heart as Bejoy said goodbye to them. The two foreigners had said they would pray that night for Gandhiji's health. Bejoy had no faith in prayer, but he was deeply moved.

Neela was on her way to Gunada's residence. The ailing child there had died two days previously. She had been to see Gunada's wife the day before, but since the morning she was overwhelmed with anxiety over the Mahatma's condition. She never even had time to realise that it was her duty to be near Gunada's wife in her hour of sorrow. It was not that she had not thought of it, but she did not have the kind of awareness and nervous strength that enables one to work even in times of disaster. When James and Harold came, she felt a sort of vexation; she did not analyse her emotions, but when Bejoy welcomed the visitors she left as soon as she could. And as she stepped out of the house, she recalled that she should go and see Gunada's wife. Not that the latter particularly wanted the consolation which Neela's company could offer; she had infinite patience, and to all outward appearance was unperturbed. Neela went to her more particularly because she admired her fortitude, and wanted to imbibe it in order to

defeat the uneasiness that weighed on her soul. Gandhiji's fast had stirred her emotions and in the consequent process of introspection, she had discovered in herself strands of feeling of which she was rather ashamed. She had been trying to forget Kanai and her feeling for him. She knew it was not a mere physical infatuation, though of course she knew at the same time that love between a man and a woman must always be founded on a physical relationship. She had tried to tell herself that when her love was unrequited, she must no longer let it sear her heart and humiliate herself. . . Kanai had rescued Geeta—he wanted to save her from the clutches of some silly old libertine. But was it merely a humanitarian impulse? How in that case could a girl like Geeta, young and immature, presume to fall in love with him, which she certainly had done? She herself had told Kanai that it was his duty to marry Geeta, and she distinctly remembered his reply. He did not say that he did not love Geeta, but that marriage was for him quite inconceivable, that there was a strain of lunacy in his family. He had told her of this psychological aberration often enough in the past. . . Neela wanted to drown her anxieties in work—she had taken leave from the office on the plea of ill-health and was giving all her time to the political party with which she was in contact. She worked tirelessly for meetings and processions, she marched in crowds carrying banners, shouting slogans—'Release Gandhiji'—'Congress and League, unite!'—working alongside her brother Nepi. She wanted in her pre-occupation to find release from a sense of the emotional weakness of which she felt rather ashamed. . . There had been a time when in a kind of desperation she had felt like drawing and being drawn towards one of her foreigner friends. A girl in our country is given away in marriage by her father

—the husband receives her as a desirable chattel. Even in that constricted atmosphere, however, there is room for the mutual conquest of hearts. Neela had felt no shame when she first contemplated capturing the heart of a foreigner. But today the very thought of it made her tingle with a sense of shame. It must have been an emotional rebuff which had turned her inclinations in that direction. She realised her weakness and wanted now to overcome it. When she could be herself again, she might form new attachments and would not need to feel the slightest uneasiness on that account. . .

Neela was fairly submerged in her musings, but it was not long before she was rudely shaken out of it. The sights on Calcutta's roadside made her shudder. These were common sights, and yet no sensitive mind could be reconciled to such happenings. It was as if all men's dreams were being dissolved and the soul of man was shrinking and shrivelling away. Men and women, of all ages, lined the roadside—their bodies mere skeletons, a ghoulous scene of human misery.

The less listless among the starvelings wandered from door to door, begging for any kind of food. 'Please—please give me a little rice-water, please—' The wail was excruciating.

A young mother, with three rickety infants, barred Neela's way: 'Mother, give a little rice to my children'. Another group of beggars noticing her, was trying to cross the road from the other side. They were checked by the hooting progress of a motor-bike on which were two police sergeants going their rounds. 'Mind you don't get run over, you idiots!' The officers of the law admonished the startled beggars. Neela could hear their words which brought a smile of bitterness to her lips. 'Please, mother,

you'll be a queen—give us some rice.' Neela, wanting to run away, could only say dejectedly: 'Come to our house earlier in the morning. There's nothing to give you now.' 'Give us some leavings from your plate', they whimpered.

A little boy was intently looking for something to eat out of the dust-bin.

Neela took out her purse and found a four-anna piece. That was the smallest coin she had on her. Mysteriously enough, small coins had vanished off the market, pice simply did not seem to exist, and the shopkeepers gave you no change. The price of necessities had soared to unthinkable heights. Rice sold at thirty rupees per maund. Wheat had passed that figure and was pretty nearly unobtainable. There was no sugar available in the market. Clerks earning thirty to forty rupees a month had begun to starve, with their families. From the countryside, destitute men and women poured desperately into the great city in search of food. They wandered from door to door and wailed. . .

Calcutta's pavements offered a strange spectacle. Destitutes, with nowhere to lay their heads, sat there or spread themselves out in varying postures of listless repose. Their clothes were tattered and hardly covered a woman's shame. The skeleton of a mother could often be seen, sitting with a vacant look in her eyes, with an infant crying at intervals and vainly trying to suck at her shrivelled breasts. Little nude children would stare at the city's strange sights, their natural curiosity and playfulness numbed by hunger and awe. Rows of men and women slept on the pavements, with no covering on their bodies and no roof to their heads, even when it was cold. They had organised a kind of life of their own, quarrelling, gossiping, begging, love-making with furtive desperation. Death on the streets had begun to happen. The other day



a man was found beside the dustbin near a market, sprawling, dead. Only the day before, Neela had seen herself a man who leant against a wall in front of a chemist's shop, and was dead. There was a fixed look on his face and his teeth protruded. She could not realise from a distance that he was dead, but when she came near, she shuddered. . . But perhaps most haunting of all was the procession of unfortunates scouring Calcutta's blacked-out streets and beating their head against door after door and wailing—'Mother, please give us something to eat—some leavings from your plates—a drop of ricewater!' It was as if invisible bodies moved about in the great city and in their agonising exclamations gave vent to the giant sorrow of our people. . .

That morning Neela had an argument with Bejoy and during the discussion expressed herself vehemently against the hoarders. 'Don't be so cruel to those unfortunates', Bejoy had told her with his usual smile.

'Oh, mustn't I?' She retorted. 'But if we had the Soviets——'

'Now then, Neela, let's keep the Soviets out of this talk. They have a country where the hoarder just doesn't exist. Don't bring them in.'

'Well, in that case, take England.'

'Yes, of course', Bejoy retorted. 'Let's take England. Well, the war affects that country, even more than India, for they're fighting longer. But my dear Neela, food prices haven't quadrupled there, have they? And in poor Bengal there's been an eight or tenfold rise. Britain and India have the same economic system; hoarding can't be inconceivable in Britain as it is in Russia, but there doesn't seem to be the kind of hoarding we've got down here. Why not

find out the reason for this difference. Just think where our two countries differ.'

Neela was turning that conversation over in her mind. Yes, Bejoy was right. Britain was a free country, while India—a voice suddenly interrupted her thoughts.

'So it's you, *Mai-ji*, I'm so relieved.'

Neela got a start; it was the up-country shopkeeper who was looking after Gunada's household.

She heard that for two days Gunada's wife had refused any food. The first day nobody had dared ask her. Her son had died and she looked as if she did not belong with the rest of the world. . .

Without flinching, she had caressed her dead child, prepared the body for the funeral, and with her finger on the child's cold chin had said: 'It's a pity I can't come with you, darling. But I've to break the news to your father and must stay back. And I'll have to tell him how you died, my sweet—how the chemist wanted twentyfive rupees for medicine which was worth only five and of which he had a big stock. . . I've so many more things to tell, and I must let you leave me behind.'

When the condition of the child was very critical, the doctor had prescribed an injection. A foreign drug was necessary, and it was stocked only in one particular shop. The doctor had warned that normally the drug was worth a rupee but perhaps it would cost five rupees—at least that was the price charged a few days back. The friendly shopkeeper was sent with ten rupees, in case the hoarder's rapacity had soared meanwhile, but he came back with the intimation that twentyfive rupees were demanded.

By the time the money was scraped together and the drug fetched, the child was dead. . .

Perhaps she was still fasting, Neela wondered as she walked on. She had to stop once, to avoid a police motor-bike rushing by. Too many policemen on the road were an ominous sign. How was Gandhiji today, she asked herself involuntarily; the picture of the saint flitted before her eyes . . .

Gunada's wife had not broken her fast, and Neela, when she saw her, expressed her concern. 'You've got to live', she pleaded, nearly in tears.

'Oh yes, of course, I know that I've got to live, so that I can tell the story of to-day's happenings to generations that'll be coming.'

Quite of a sudden, her pale and shrunken face was flushed with excitement, and there was a glint of power in her eyes. 'If this rope round our throats is untied, I'll shout out my story. If it isn't, well, I'll refuse to be strangled, I'll manage to groan it out. I've got to live. I'm not fasting in order that I may die.'

'Must you fast then?' Neela asked, gently.

'I'm not fasting for the sake of my child. The day he died, I didn't feel like having any food. But yesterday, when I got up and saw the paper, I wondered how Gandhiji feels when he fasts, and I decided I'd find out.'

Neela could insist no more. She sat with her for a while, without a word. Her *Bowdi* lay down quietly on the floor, her eyes closed, her body and mind numbed by exhaustion and grief.

Silently, Neela left the house. Her mind, already embittered, was in a fury. She did not wish to go back home. Perhaps her Bejoy-da was still discussing internationalist ideals with James and Harold. She had no patience for such things . . .

She walked on, aimlessly. It was noon, and there was not much of a crowd on the streets. She wanted, however, to avoid all crowds and walked down a quiet lane parallel to the main road. It was a residential quarter. There were only a few groceries and *pan* shops here and there. The doors of the houses were closed. But she could not avoid even there the wandering groups of destitute-beggars, wailing their cry for food . . .

Suddenly she noticed a young wife opening a door, a plateful of rice in her hand. Her heart-strings felt a strange tug . . . If she had a home of her own, she could have stood at her door, like the goddess of food, giving of it lovingly to her people. She wasn't beautiful, like that girl over there, but if she had a home . . . .

A little further on, a little boy was calling the destitutes to come and take some rice from out of a mug. Neela felt tears welling up her eyes. A train of thoughts passed her mind. If she had a child of her own . . .

Neela straightened herself, so to speak. She swerved towards a main road which was not very far—towards Chittaranjan Avenue, with its unceasing convoy of military traffic. She shook off her tearful feeling, looked back once to see again the girl and the child and walked ahead . . . Death stalked about the land, but she said to herself over and over again—'We must win, life must win'.

(XXX)

March the second, the last day of the Mahatma's fast.

The news in the papers had reassured the country. The doctors' bulletin about Gandhiji reported that on the twentieth day of the fast, the great man looked cheerful and the last two days had seen a decided improvement in his

condition. He was emerging triumphant out of the trial of fire . . . Neela felt somewhat comforted. She had stayed with Gunada's wife the night before, and when the morning brought better news, told her, 'You ought to break your fast to-day, *Bowdi*.'

'Yes', she smiled, 'I give you my word, I'll break my fast'.

When Neela went back home, her mind was at ease, the load of restless worry seemed to have lifted. Thoughts even of Kanai did not upset her equanimity. If he came along, she would have faced him without secret trepidation, would have spoken to him pleasantly as she used to before.

She fell asleep at mid-day, sunk in deep, restful slumber. She woke up only when Shasthi called her in the afternoon. A letter had arrived, and a uniformed messenger had brought it. It was addressed to Bejoy and was marked 'Immediate'. Bejoy had gone to a public meeting somewhere, and Neela, hesitating for a while, decided to open it. The letter came from where Geeta was having her training as nurse. It was very short. "You had admitted a girl named Geeta in this centre. She is very ill. You should please come and see her at once. The matter is extremely urgent."

Neela felt terribly worried and embarrassed. Bejoy was not there, neither was Nepi who had gone on his usual political errands, helping preparations for a hunger march or something like that. There was no knowing when either of them would return.

She decided to go herself. She was not happy about it, but there was no help. Evening was approaching ; perhaps the air-raid warning would sound. Or very much worse still, Gandhiji's condition on the last day of his fast might bring a terribly unpleasant surprise. Who knew? Neela strained

to listen if newsboys were shouting anything about Mahatma Gandhi . . .

The trams were frantically overcrowded. People were going home, tired and overcome with anxiety. They no longer gossiped picturesquely as before. Life had thrown up so many cruel problems, apparently insoluble, and they seemed like overgrown children who had lost the thread of their simple existence. Perhaps, if the siren sounded, they would not have the spirit to run fast towards safety but would walk slowly and drowsily to wherever their tired feet took them. . . .

Neela reached the place where Geeta was, and sent in the letter she had received. She was admitted at once. An elderly doctor sat at the table in a bare office room.

'I'm coming from Mr. Bejoy Sarkar's house', Neela introduced herself. 'He couldn't come, and sent me instead.'

'Please be seated', the doctor said.

'How's Geeta?'

The doctor looked out of the window and said, 'Yesterday she slipped down the stairs and was hurt in the stomach.'

'Was it very serious?'

'Not very, but—'

'Yes?'

'I'd have preferred talking to Mr. Sarkar', the doctor still stared out of the window.

'But Mr. Sarkar has sent me', Neela pleaded.

'Yes, that is so, but I wish he had come himself'.

They kept quiet for a while, and then the doctor said slowly, 'The girl is with child. She should be taken away from here.'

'What?' Neela gave a start.

'She had a hemorrhage and while examining her, we got to find out her condition.'

Neela felt the blood coursing excitedly in her veins. She could hardly contain herself in her indignation. And she thought immediately of Kanai, scion of a decadent aristocracy and given over to the vices of his class . . .

'You understand why we sent the letter', the doctor continued. 'I'm afraid we can't let her stay in the nurses' quarters any longer.'

'I'll take her along if her condition permits', Neela said.

'That's good. There isn't much to worry about her condition, as a matter of fact.'

When Geeta appeared, she smiled, palely, as she did before. Neela did not return the smile, she sat gloomily, hate and anger glistening in her fixed gaze.

The taxi rushed along the blacked-out streets. The hooded lights of numberless cars were like the fast moving eyes of enormous animals.

'Neela-di!' Geeta whispered.

'Be quiet', Neela snapped back. 'You aren't very strong and must not speak.'

The taxi stopped at the door of Bejoy's house. Neela got off and put out her hand to help Geeta. 'No, thank you, Neela-di,' she said, 'I can get off on my own, you needn't trouble.'

Neela paid the fare and gave loud knocks on the door. The storm in her mind found vent, so to speak, in her every gesture. They had not long to wait; perhaps, Shasthi had noticed them alighting from a taxi and hurried down to open the door.

It was not Shasthi, however, but Kanai who opened the door. He looked emaciated, his head was shaven; one

got the impression that he had just recovered from a long and serious illness.

'How are you, Miss Sen?', Kanai said in a tired voice, 'You're ill, aren't you, Geeta?'

Neela gave no reply, but continued to look stern. Geeta lowered her head and said, 'I'm not ill, but I fell down the stairs and hurt myself. I'm all right now', she moved ahead of Kanai and Neela and walked slowly up the stairs.

'Has she taken leave from the training centre?' Kanai asked.

'No', Neela replied this time, 'they wouldn't let Geeta stay there any longer.'

'But why?'

'Oh, that isn't possible', Neela fixed her gaze on Kanai's face.

'I don't understand', Kanai said.

'You don't? Well, Geeta—Geeta's going to have a child'.

Kanai was quite obviously startled. Geeta, too, was not beyond ear-shot on the stairs.

'You are a perfect scoundrel', Neela suddenly burst out at Kanai.

For a moment Kanai seemed to flare up, but he checked himself.

'How you could bring yourself down to this—' Neela broke off.

From the stairs Geeta spoke frantically, 'No—No—No, Neela-di!'

'You keep quiet, Geeta', Neela shouted.

'I won't', Geeta spoke determinedly this time. 'You don't know what you're talking about.'



'Let's go upstairs, Miss Sen', Kanai said. 'At this rate, we'll be collecting a crowd. Let's sit down and talk it over.' There was a sort of quiet strength in his voice; not a trace of the old, embittered cynicism remained in it.

But on Neela's face was a stamp of acute unrest. Geeta's outburst seemed to have sent a stinging sensation in every limb of her body. She turned fiercely towards Kanai and said, 'You ought to marry Geeta without delay, Kanai-Babu.'

Before Kanai could answer her, Geeta approached her. 'I know what's in your mind', she said, 'but you're absolutely wrong.'

The old melancholy and pallor had returned to Geeta's face, but she had changed beyond recognition. This became quite clear when she looked Neela unwaveringly in the face and related her woes. Not once was her voice choked by tears; when she had finished her story she even smiled, a pale shadow of a smile. 'You've no right to blame Kanai-da, Neela-di; he's been like a god to me. If he was my elder brother, he couldn't have done more than he has done.'

Neela sat stunned and silent when she heard the full story. She looked out into the darkness, wrapt in thought. Geeta spoke to her softly, 'Kanai-da loves you, Neela-di, I know it'. Neela did not say a word. 'Kanai-da?' Geeta called.

'What is it, Geeta?' Kanai said, as he came in.

Geeta shuddered to see how Kanai had changed. So far, in the excitement, she had not noticed that Kanai was clean shaven, even to the hair on his head. It suggested bereavement, and to Geeta's questioning glance, Kanai replied with a melancholy smile, 'There've been a number of accidents in our family. Bombs dropped on the house—'

'I've heard that your great-uncle was killed' . . .

'It wasn't only him. Our great-grandmother was also killed, and we couldn't find a trace of her bones even.'

The great-grand-mother was old Sukhamay Chakravarti's widow, the ninety-year-old lump of decaying flesh, deaf and almost blind. She had lived through so much in life, and now her turn had arrived.

Geeta felt her eyes overflowing with tears. On her tears was reflected the light thrown by the electric bulb.

'I went to uncle Mani with the news', Kanai continued. 'He was the only one who hadn't evacuated to the countryside. I heard there that my youngest brother had an attack of malignant malaria. They had all gone to a village near Katwa and well, that was that. I went to that god-forsaken village and found that he was better, but our second brother had typhoid'.

'How's he now?'

'Oh, he's better, but mother is dead, she died of snake-bite.'

He spoke in a voice of such distant stillness that the blood seemed to freeze in Neela's veins. She wanted desperately to say something, but not a syllable escaped her lips, she could not even look up at Kanai's face. Geeta, too, was speechless, only tears streamed down her cheeks.

After a moment Kanai gave a forced smile and said, 'My sister Uma is getting married towards the end of *Phalgun*, you know.'

'Getting married?'

'Yes, mother died on the 24th of *Magh*. And Uma's wedding is to be on *Falgun* 28. I had objected to this wedding. I know how Uma cries her heart out over it. But father insists on the marriage going through as soon as possible. A rich man's heir in the village has taken a fancy

to Uma, and father doesn't want to take any chances by delaying the ceremony. And that's been that.'

Geeta could not say a word. Neela also sat in distracted silence.

'There's no difference', Kanai continued, 'between Amal and this brother-in-law-to-be of mine. Amal at any rate had a cloak of gentility but this chap hasn't even that. His father has made millions this year out of rice and paddy sales. Besides, they've been rich for several generations, and nobody minds if he is drunk and shouts himself hoarse in a public place like the railway station . . . I suggested to Uma that she should leave the place with me, but she wouldn't hear of it. It seems mother has left word with her never to give any pain to father! D'you know Geeta that mother wanted to punish me for my ways and said that I shouldn't be allowed to perform her obsequies . . . Well, I didn't perform her *Sradh*, but I got my head shaven—and here I am, all my ties with the family finally severed . . .'

There was a knock at the front door, and Kanai went to answer it.

. . . 'Mother, please give us some rice, please, mother!' The cry of the roving destitutes came from the street. Kanai remembered at once what he had seen in the rural areas. There also the lower strata, landless labourers and poor artisans, were wandering—from door to door, begging for a morsel of food . . .

It was early March, and the tenant-farmers had still some stocks of rice. Perhaps a few months later they also would have to be wandering on the streets. The price of paddy was rising and falling, a mysterious market left the farmers dazed. Enormous quantities of paddy were being brought up and stacked in the merchants' godowns . . . Kanai recalled suddenly what his pupil Asoka, Amal's

brother and the son of the Rai Bahadur B. B. Mukherjee, had told him quite some time back. "If the keys of our godown were lost for a week", he had said, "all Calcutta would be starving". The Rai Bahadur, also, had advised him to take to the trade in rice . .

' . . . Mother! Please, mother! . . . ' The plaintive cry was nauseating. Why didn't they know of a stronger method of enforcing their demands on the prosperous? Why did they whine in that disgusting fashion? Kanai opened the door and spoke, rather sharply. 'You must wait till the rice is cooked. And don't wait so, if you're going to wait.'

The sound of footsteps was heard, and who could it be but Bejoy returning from his tour. 'Bejoy-da?' Kanai asked. 'I say, is it you, Kanai?' Bejoy spoke, in surprise. 'Where had you been so long, Kanai?'

Kanai's appearance gave Bejoy a sort of shock, but he smiled in his accustomed manner and said, 'Where had you been, Kanoo? Were you practising austerities in the mountains, or what? You have shaved off your head, your nose sticks out in a sharp, ascetic style and there's a sort of mystic illumination about your face. Now, what's happened?'

'Mother's dead, Bejoy-da', Kanai answered.

Bejoy was not in the least discomfited, but in a moment he turned grave and said, 'Mother's dead? I'm so sorry, Kanoo'.

When they went upstairs, another surprise was in store for Bejoy. 'What brings you here?' he asked, in amused stupefaction, when he saw Geeta. The girl only smiled in reply.

Neela gave him the whole story. She spoke in a quiet, tired voice, and tears flowed down her cheeks. Such display

of emotion was rather foreign to Neela. After a while, however, she took herself in rein and was quite composed as she told the concluding portion of the story.

Bejoy smoked cigarette after cigarette and looked fixedly at the wall.

Kanai stood on the verandah and leaned against the railing. Airplanes flew across the sky—airplanes which had extended the war to the ends of the earth. War in one corner of the world could now be directed from another. And the machines coursed along, carrying tons of death-dealing bombs from country to country, and dropping them on towns, on people's cherished homes, on centres of age-long culture, burning and devastating them, returning to their bases . . . Was this to be the last war in history or was it only the preface to a bigger, a crueller world-war? . . . .

From the streets came unceasingly the wail in women's voices—'Mother, please, mother! . . . a little rice, mother!'

Doors were being opened in some houses, and hastily a portion of the food cooked for the family was given to whoever among the destitutes was nearest the door. There was only a morsel to give, and a whole row of supplicants.

Not everybody had the means to give away food these days, but everybody seemed ashamed of having anything to eat when so many went without. Some doors, of course, were shut. But in spite of it, Kanai told himself how there was a core of goodness in man, a quality that would lead them one day to a new society, where these horrors could not happen . . . .

Bejoy came out and stood beside him. A pleasant breeze gently fanned their faces. 'What a paradox!' Bejoy exclaimed smilingly. 'Bombers overhead and destitutes

crying for food down below. But spring hasn't forgotten her assignation. Did you realise before that to-day's the nineteenth of *Phalgun*?

Kanai smiled in reply. Yes, the breeze came quite unmistakably from the south.

Leisurely, Bejoy lit a cigarette. 'Bejoy-da!' Kanai spoke after a while.

'Yes?'

'You've heard Geeta's story, haven't you?'

'Yes, I have'.

'Well, it was me who brought her along. I thought I had rescued her. But——' he could not complete the sentence.

'I think I should marry Geeta and look after her', Kanai said, after a moment's silence.

'This time also, Bejoy did not reply.

'Bejoy-da?' Kanai called again.

'I've been listening, Kanoo, but I remember you telling me one day that you couldn't marry her, that you weren't in love with her.'

'I'm not, as a matter of fact', Kanai spoke softly, 'but I'll try my best.' He added after a while. 'I'm not sure if I could ever be in love with her, but I could try and make her happy, couldn't I?'

'Why not ask Geeta first of all?' Bejoy put in.

'I wish you to do it, please, for me.'

'No', somebody spoke from behind them. 'No'.

The two of them, startled, turned round and saw Geeta and Neela together at the entrance to the verandah. 'Come along, girls', Bejoy said, jauntily, 'Why stand back there?'

'We didn't want to disturb you talking', Geeta replied.

'How silly!' Bejoy laughed. 'But Kanai wants to marry you.'

'No.' Geeta, answered, in an unusually determined tone of voice.

Bejoy said nothing. Nor did Kanai who stood there, obviously embarrassed. Neela was silent too. It was Geeta who spoke again. 'Please don't worry about me. I think I could work for my living. And when my child is born, I will bring him up myself, I'm sure I could'.

'You are a good girl, Geeta', Bejoy said, after a while. 'It's so good to hear you speak like that'.

Geeta smiled, and went inside the room.

It was nearly midnight. Kanai still sat on the verandah, and Bejoy lay stretched on the bed, wide awake. From inside the room, Geeta's voice could be heard. Neela must in that case be also awake.

Everybody waited anxiously for news from the Aga Khan Palace in Bombay. Mahatma Gandhi was to have broken his fast that morning. Twenty hectic days had passed, and towards the end he had even rallied. There could be no doubt whatever that he had emerged out of the ordeal in triumph. And yet one's worries could not be set at rest till more definite news came.

For quite some time Bejoy was silent. Then suddenly he asked in a quiet voice: 'What are you going to do, Kanai?'

'How do you mean, Bejoy-da?'

'Would you sort of dedicate your life, you know', Bejoy smiled, 'and work for India's salvation, as the orators put it, or would you get married and settle down?'

'I'll do both,' Kanai answered, also smiling, 'Your good old days are gone. We don't think one has to be a monk to fight for the country's freedom'.

Bejoy said nothing in reply. After a while, he suddenly asked, 'You're in love with Neela, aren't you?'

Kanai did not answer.

'Why not get your blood examined?' Bejoy asked.

'I've done it already, Bejoy-da', Kanai said, and after a pause added, 'The blood test showed that the blood in my veins was free of all impurity. It nearly sent me mad, this utterly unexpected discovery!'

Kanai related to Bejoy the full story of that dreadful night when he had wandered the streets not knowing what to do or what to feel. He told him of his last conversation with his grand-uncle and how the old man had received the news.

'I'm so happy, Kanoo, very, very happy', Bejoy said, after a long pause.

'I know, Bejoy-da', Kanai replied, 'And I know now that I've rid myself of the nightmare that haunts the Chakravartis. I feel myself a free man, a citizen of the world, which I never could before, Bejoy-da.'

Bejoy got up, lit a cigarette and said, 'You better try and get some sleep. I'll sit up for the news'.

'No, Bejoy-da, I don't feel like sleep.'

'It's a good job the girls have gone to sleep. We can't hear their voices any longer.' Bejoy said.

Immediately Geeta spoke up from inside the room. 'No, Bejoy-da, you're quiet wrong, we are awake, both of us'. She came out on the verandah and said, 'Neela-di doesn't say a word to me. We were listening in to you.'

Somewhere nearby, a clock struck four.

Within the half-hour, newsboys would be running round Calcutta, on their feet or on bikes. What kind of news would they be hawking then? . . . The time-piece was ticking monotonously away . . .



The front door shook suddenly with an eager knock. Somebody must have been in a terrible hurry.

'Bejoy-da! Bejoy-da'. 'Who's it? Nepi?' 'Yes, Bejoy-da, it's me, I've brought the paper'.

Neela came out of the room 'What's the news, Nepi?' she asked, her voice in a tremor. 'Mahatmaji has broken the fast. He's well'. Nepi's eyes shone as he spoke.

"Whatever the world might say or think, the eternal verities which India has sought through the centuries have again emerged triumphant. The fruits of Vashishtha's glory have not yet been exhausted. The Indian sky is overcast with clouds; but we have just been witness to the grandeur of the setting sun's last rays. Truth has triumphed. The ritual fire of sacrifice has not produced any scars, the flames have shone in a new effulgence. And in that light deception has been shorn of its subtle habiliments and has been revealed in all its nakedness. The deception and chicanery of the twentieth century cannot, of course, be shamed in the process. It flourishes in aggression, in insolence. Let that be. Truth fears not her foes. It is the conquest of fear that ushers in the realisation of truth. And truth has conquered, in our midst, conquered fear for all time to come. May you live long, Mahatma! May you live for ever—you who embody in your serenity the soul of our India.

"A mighty cataclysm overhangs the world to-day. But every human being who is worth his salt waits, inspite of it all, for that bright dawn which is certain to ensue when this night of the utterest gloom is over. The global war is, for man and his social life, an epoch's end. And as the bad old order nears its end, we found our hopes on the Mahatma's life and work as the propitiation for the evils

that have so long been besetting us, as the inspiration for work and self-dedication."

Bejoy went on writing, in a strain of emotionalism which he normally avoided, but could not at that moment.

"From time immemorial, men have gone to war, for the interests of families and clans and communities and nations and classes. That war has spread its tentacles all over the earth today. The cruellest carnage goes on outside, while in the recesses of men's soul there goes on also a relentless conflict. The conflict between animal instincts and the human consciousness—between ego and self-realisation. We have not won yet in the fight against animality, against the crime of selfishness. The struggle has continued, and ever-rejuvenating ideals have been propagated. But the canker of self-interest has sought to inject itself into ideals in reptilian manner. And like worm in a fruit, it eats life out of ideals and emits a poison that causes an unending succession of wars."

It was nearly morning, the eastern sky showed a red haze, the usher of sunrise.

Geeta was busy making the tea.

'Where were you last night?' Kanai asked Nepi.

Nepi brought from downstairs a piece of pasteboard, a brush and a small tin of ink. Some writing was engraved on the pasteboard. One had to daub it with ink and place it on a wall, and whatever slogan was written there would emerge before the public view. 'I've been pasting slogans all last night', Nepi said, shyly.

Bejoy looked up from his writing and smiled. His pen did not rest . . . "During every great war men dream of freedom. They suffer, they sacrifice all they hold most dear, they are sustained when the war goes on and when after war, famine and pestilence follow, with the hope, the

assurance, that their sufferings and sacrifices would be rewarded by freedom coming to all—freedom from injustice and oppression and exploitation. Eighteen *Akshauhinis* gave their lives in the *Kurukshetra* battle only in that assurance; they had hoped that sin was being uprooted and irreligion revoked, that true religion was being established and the *Geeta's* apocalyptic hopes realised.

"Yet it did not happen. The fruits of that human sacrifice which was the *Kurukshetra* battle fell not into the hands of the people. The *Pandavas* seized as their rightful share what should have gone to the whole community. Instead of the reign of humanity there followed the reign of the Pandava dynasty. New stratifications, new antagonisms were generated. The liberation of man waited for accomplishment.

"When World War I ended, men's hopes ran high, for a League of Nations was set up and proposals of disarmament deceptively tumpeted. But the long-sought-for liberation did not come. No wonder the global war of today has followed . . . But this time we are hoping,—and there are people all over the world working to see that the hope is well and truly realised—that there will be an end now to all wars. If, again, we fail, that will be the tragic preface to yet another world carnage. But come what may, the direst diluge will not drown the soul of man. We will live, whatever happens, live and work for the great day when after the sacrificial rites the nectar of freedom will be churned by the people and a brave new world will ensue.

"Many offerings would come from diverse peoples when that new order will be set up. Some would bring the grand formula of the classless society; others would bring the knowledge garnered by science. India would send also her offering—the message which the Mahatma, in his

tribulation, has imparted to the world, the message of Rabindranath Tagore—Knowledge of one's self, respect for life, for all animate existence, passion for truth, 'a vision unimpaired by attachment, resistance to evil, invincible, non-violent determination. India's message will merge, then, with the world's, and the new society will be chimed in by bells of harmony sweeter-sounding than any that humanity has heard before."

Everyone felt a load off their minds, and in the prevailing mood of general good cheer, Neela had forgotten her hesitancy and her sense of guilt. She looked up at Kanai, smiled happily, and felt at the same time tears welling up her eyes which she made no effort to hide. Kanai, too, came forward, and took Neela's hand in his—it was as if in a moment all their misunderstanding was smoothed over. 'Comrade!' he spoke to her, quietly. Neela smiled and did not withdraw her hand . . . . They stood there, hands linked together, unashamed.

The noise of a plane could be heard from the far end of the sky. In about a couple of minutes a dozen planes flew in formation overhead, leaving a trail of harsh, grating tumult. Everyone looked up to see what it was like.

It was early morning now, and from the street rose cries of agony—'A little rice, mother, please, a little rice left over from last night!'

The smile disappeared from everybody's face. It seemed a crime to be happy till the dreadful famine was over.

Bejoy finished his writing. 'Kanai, brother, now you get to work', he said. 'And you, Neela, you too must join your comrade now.'

'This epoch's going to end', Kanai answered, 'and I'm lucky I've got my release. Tell me what work I must take up'.

Bejoy looked at him and said in an anxious tone of voice. 'But I'm afraid you aren't very well yet, Kanoo, are you?'

Kanai smiled as he answer. 'My mind'll make up for the weakness of my body, Bejoy-da. Besides, I'm not alone'. And turning towards Neela he added, 'My comrade will be with me this time.'

'Tell us, Bejoy-da, what we should do', Neela asked.

'There's no end to work, my dears. There's no end'. Bejoy's voice shook unaccountably. 'We've got a big job—to take my people across all this misery—to another epoch.'

Bejoy put off the electric switch. It was daylight.

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